Monsters In Paradise

By: Curtis Wildcat

Odd creatures are showing up around Gensokyo, bypassing the Hakurei Barrier completely. As these creatures interact with the residents in various ways, Yukari goes on a cross-reality trip to solve this mystery, seek a means of getting them home, and get reacquainted with a magnificent world. UPDATE: See my profile for an important announcement.

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MONSTERS IN PARADISE

By: Curtis Wildcat

Pokémon and the Touhou Project are the properties of their respective owners and copyright holders. As usual, keep the flames restricted to the barbecue grill.

And for the record: yes, I'm aware that the Garden of the Sun and Mugenkan aren't synonymous with each other in the Windows canon. Just throwing that out there.

Sunshine poured down on the vast sunflower field. Tiny birds and bugs went about their business. The temperature was just right, and a light breeze gently rocked the flowers back and forth. There was very little noise, and nothing caused any disturbances.

Just the way Yuuka Kazami liked it.

Parasol tilted just behind her head, Yuuka journeyed sedately through the sunflowers. She loved these daily walks, taking in everything that the season had to offer and revelling in the vast wonder that was the Garden of the Sun. It gave her an excuse to ponder her life, the things she enjoyed and the memories that were ingrained...

A light smirk. The shrine maiden and her enthusiastic friend had rudely barged into her home some years before, but after enough time went by she had decided that her bouts with them were amongst the fondest memories of her life. It had been quite a while since she'd needed to use more than a small fraction of her power when dealing with someone. After the spellcard system was initiated,

she'd almost hoped that one of them would show up to duel her and Elly.

Aside from blaming her for an overabundance of flowers, neither of them ever did, however. Reimu was one of the laziest people in Gensokyo and never did a single ounce of unnecessary work; it was doubtful that she'd make an effort to return. Marisa likely feared her on some level, and probably believed that Yuuka was mad at her for creating her own rendition of her favorite attacks. *I suppose I can't entirely blame her, considering everything.*

Yuuka never liked being disturbed, and she took the preservation of her Garden very seriously. She'd gleefully tell of her nastier tendencies within earshot of others, attempting to make them second-guess themselves or just plain scare them away. But silently, she wished that someone would join her on these walks just once...

Something hopped across her path, and she paused to regard it. A yellow and brown bulbous thing, with a leafy stem on its head and soulful eyes that almost hurt her to gaze upon. She had never seen such a creature before, so she stooped down to take a closer look.

The animal or plant, or whatever it was, stared up at her inquisitively. "Kerrnnnn?" it trilled, seeming to ask a question.

Yuuka's eyebrow raised. Whatever language it spoke, it wasn't what she was used to. Still, it felt as if it were right on the edges of her understanding. *Almost as if it were at home amongst the sunflowers...* "You're a strange little one," she spoke. "I have lived here for a very long time, and I've never seen the likes of you before. You're no youkai, no myth or legend given life, and you're certainly no human... where did you come from, I wonder?"

More of that strange "sun-kern" noise. Feelings of peace, apprehension, fear and wonder flowed past her in quick succession. It confirmed to her that the creature was more plant than animal, at least, but she still couldn't understand a thing it was saying. She shook her head. "I don't understand you at all, but I can tell you

seem at ease here. You may live here if you want so long as you don't mean my flowers any harm."

The creature jumped a few times, crying happily. Yuuka stood up and shouldered her parasol, pondering the insignificant plant-thing for a few moments, then walked past it deeper into the Garden. She still had the rest of the day ahead of her, after all.

When it hopped along close behind her, she made no attempts to discourage its actions.

Clusters of fairies dotted the sky.

Most of the time, the fairies knew enough not to bother Yuuka or the Garden. They were familiar with the raw strength that she had at her disposal, and they were afraid of the gentle smile that adorned her face as she scattered them to the winds. There were occasions when they threw caution to said winds and tried to bombard her regardless of the consequences, however.

Yuuka knew that there was one thing that all of those occasions had in common: there was an incident in progress. She silently pitied the poor fool who had the gall to get on Reimu's bad side.

The storm that crashed down around her was a virtual rain of danmaku. Yuuka was not a naturally swift youkai, but that slowness served its purpose as she twisted and spun through the bullet-filled barrages with precision; occasionally, she returned fire and temporarily extinguished those that opposed her. She could hear the panicked cries of the bulb plant on the ground below her, and she chuckled. *Pay attention, little one, for you are receiving a crash course in the art of dodging.*

Deciding that she wanted a breather, Yuuka opened her parasol and levelled it at the incoming hordes. Magic particles drifted into it, a sign that energy was being gathered... and then a tremendous beam of power was torn loose, wider than anything Marisa was capable of

producing. The fairies' angry yells turned to screams of surprise as they were unable to turn away, and they were reduced to so much dust.

The Master Spark faded out, and Yuuka surveyed the sky. The most distant bunches of winged nuisances were far enough way that they dodged the attack in time, but the display of power was enough to give them pause. Nodding, she permitted a brief look at her companion to see how it fared, smiling when she noticed that it had taken cover amidst the sunflower stalks. "I guess you still have a ways to go," she told it, floating down close enough for it to hear her clearly.

But the sentient plant was not looking at her... at least, not directly. Its eyes were shifted just a bit off to the side, and after a few seconds it started hopping again and trilling eagerly. Yuuka wondered briefly what it was that had gotten its attention, and glanced back ahead of her to see if the remaining fairies had made any moves; the pests had not budged from their positions, however, and in fact seemed to be in the middle of an argument amongst themselves. *What is it that has it worked up?...*

And then she realized that the plant's eyes were pointed directly at her parasol. She nodded. *Of course.* "That was my Master Spark," she informed it proudly. "I take it you like what you see?"

A vague sense of approval accompanied the plant's reply, with eagerness and determination close on its heels. Yuuka could only guess at what it was trying to say, but she gave it a suitable response. For a few moments she couldn't believe what she was saying. "You... want to help me fight?"

An affirmative. "Sun-kern!"

Yuuka couldn't help chuckling; the whole thing was just too funny. The creature couldn't have been much bigger than half the length of her arm, it was weak enough that any one of those fairies could've defeated it in a fight, and it had just witnessed her casually wiping

the floor with them. Where did it get off being so confident all of a sudden?

And why did she feel like humoring the little plant? "You can tag along, I suppose," she decided, maneuvering the creature onto her parasol and lifting it up onto her shoulder. "Just be sure that you can pull your own weight. I will not be held responsible if anything happens to you."

That was definitely a determined vibe she was getting from the creature. Yuuka gave it an approving look, then took to the skies to drive the rest of the pests away.

Their argument- - -whatever it was- - -having come to an abrupt end, the fairies fought back against her the best they could. It was fruitless, of course; none of their bullets came even close to winging her. She laughed, swinging her parasol and smacking several of them aside before blasting others with flower-shaped danmaku.

As she fought, she kept the little plant in her periphereal vision. Like Yuuka had been doing in preparation for the Master Spark, magic particles- - -or at least she assumed they were magical in nature- - -were starting to gather around its leaves. *Hmm, I wonder... is it going to fire a Spark of its own? ...It's doubtful. There's very little strength in it from what I can tell. To mimic my attack, it would need a large reservoir of power that it could call on...*

"Suuunnnn..."

A squad of seven fairies, a bit larger than the rest, closed in on Yuuka from the side. They were completely focused on her, ignoring the peculiar shining growth on her shoulder. The flower-loving youkai turned towards them, smiling and beckoning them towards her with a finger. If anything this served to enrage the batch, and they decided upon firing the largest and quickest bullets that they could summon.

"KERRRRNNNNN!"

As her vision lit up, Yuuka froze. She supposed she should have realized it a bit sooner. Her tagalong was obviously a plant, or close enough for it not to matter. She had figured that the power needed to mimic the Master Spark would've needed to come from somewhere, and the creature did not possess any internal stores of that power. Instead, it was drawing on the most obvious source of energy required for its existence!

That energy came to the fore as a beam of intensified sunlight erupted from the little creature, spearing the fairy formation dead center. It wasn't anywhere close to matching Marisa's power, let alone her own, but it would suffice for the task at hand. Yuuka rotated a little bit, allowing the beam to sweep across the sky and exterminate what was left of the rabble.

The blast was extinguished a few short seconds later, leaving the plant somewhat lethargic, but the job was done; for the time being at least the fairies wouldn't be bothering anyone, least of all Yuuka. The youkai dropped back to the ground, keeping her free hand on her shoulder to prevent the plant from falling off.

"Sunnn..." the pipsqueak murmured. There was both tiredness and satisfaction in that high-pitched voice.

"You had the right idea," Yuuka told it, resuming her twice-interrupted walk. "Although... I don't know if you possess an alternate means of attack, but I suggest you consider using that instead next time. It took entirely too much time for you to prepare yourself; a lot can happen in the space of a few seconds."

"Kerrnnn."

"Hmm... and as long as you're going to be staying here in the Garden, you'll need a name. I just can't call you 'thing' all the time."

"Sun-kern."

Yuuka stopped for a moment, pondering, then nodded and smiled. "Alright. 'Sunkern' it is."

"Kerrnnn!"

The sun was nearing the western horizon when Yuuka finished her walk; aside from the fairy attack, nothing remotely earth-shattering took place. Not too far from where the Garden ended, the youkai had found a place between two sunflower stalks where Sunkern could settle in for the night; the creature was all too happy to do so, leaving Yuuka to fly the short distance between the Garden and a concealed, winding path that eventually led to her true home, Mugenkan.

The clanging of metal against metal greeted her ears as she reached the end of the path, and her eyebrows raised. *An intruder?* She touched down nearby and walked towards the entrance, curious as to who Elly was fighting.

Another creature, this one human-sized and buglike. It's scythe-like arms lashed out, repeatedly deflecting the real deal before reaching out to try and score a hit. It didn't look to be an all-out fight so much as a simple spar between evenly-matched opponents from her perspective, and even if it weren't, the injury-negating magic circles associated with the spell card system were already in place. Neither of the two seemed to be taking the fight all that seriously, and the bug didn't look as if it were trying to break into her home...

Yuuka shook her head. *I don't want to know. Whatever's going on, it can wait until after my nap.* Walking past them both, she stepped into Mugenkan and left them behind, the occasional cry of "Hyyyaaa!" and "Scy-ther!" ringing out behind her.

-GAP-

It wasn't the purring noise that roused Yukari to wakefulness one evening. It wasn't the nervous bustling of her shikigami, neither was

it the sounds of life outside her window.

It was the weight.

On one occasion, she'd overslept and wouldn't wake up at the time she'd asked Ran to rouse her at. Chen, feeling playful, began to stack numerous items from around the house on top of her: articles of clothing, an old Sony Walkman, Scotch tape, and a half-filled manilla folder, amongst other things, all in an effort to see how much weight she could stack on without waking up Yukari. By the time she was done, the resulting pile was a meter high- - -and the youkai *still* hadn't woken up yet. It wasn't until a tiny bug fluttered in through the open window and came to rest at the top of the pile that she finally emerged from dreamland, much to the others' disbelief.

This time, it wasn't a heap of random stuff positioned on her stomach and chest that she saw when her eyes opened. It was a yellowish furry thing with the biggest triangle ears- - -and purple at that- - -that she'd ever seen on something that size. The animal- - -some strange cat, no doubt- - -was purring, a noise that would've soothed anyone else. It seemed fond of her, pleased merely by being in her presence.

And then Yukari's eyes shot all the way open as her brain completely started up. *Well, this is... twisted. I never thought I'd see one of them in* this *part of reality...*

Noticing her wakefulness, the Delcatty got into her face for a closer look. "Myaow?" it asked, still purring as it touched noses with her.

Yukari heard Ran unsuccessfully trying to restrain her laughter and quietly vowed to chuck a bag of dry cat food at her the next chance she got.

-GAP-

"Yukari-sama, are you sure about this?"

Ran stood back, watching Yukari exchange her favored dress for unfamiliar attire: a violet blouse and white slacks, both of which appeared made for rugged travel; a brown leather belt with six empty compartments, durable red-and-white shoes and violet wristbands. Her cap was all that remained of her traditional outfit.

"Quite sure, Ran. We would have known if these creatures were native to Gensokyo, and Reimu and I would have found out in short order if they'd fallen in from the outside." Yukari shrugged off Ran's attempt to assist her. "I'm preparing to carry out an investigation. I have a few leads to follow, and if everything goes as planned I should be able to get to the bottom of this before too long."

"Hopefully your investigation is taken care of quickly." Ran ignored the playful giggling and meowing as Chen ran in circles somewhere nearby, keeping the Delcatty company. She seemed to like having a new playmate. "Without you around to keep an eye on the border... well, it just makes me nervous."

"As long as Reimu is still in Gensokyo, it will be fine," Yukari said confidently, grabbing her parasol. "The border is not a house of cards, Ran. It is not going to fall at the slightest touch, so don't worry your head over it. Just follow your regular schedule and let Reimu know if anything turns up."

"...Alright, Yukari-sama," Ran agreed reluctantly, pressing an ice pack against her left temple and concealing the bruise left behind by an errant cat food bag. "As you wish... but if I may inquire, why the different clothes? It's not like you to travel by... *traditional* methods."

Yukari didn't reply at first, instead focusing on her reflection in the mirror. She reached through the borders, searching for what the clothes meant to her and what they represented. She brought to mind the memories that she made there, of a place she had discovered through the overpowering lure of boredom. She thought of the challenge that living there brought, and the enjoyment that came with it. She reminded herself of the land that she had seen

there, the love that she had once felt for it akin to what she felt whenever she gazed upon Gensokyo...

A portal tore open in front of the mirror, this one significantly different from the standard gaps Yukari took to get from one place to another. It gave a sense of her full power, rippling away from the edges and distorting the air; also worthy of note was that the eyes associated with said gaps seemed to *dissolve* partway in. Satisfied with its stability, she took a step into the portal... and only then did she dain to respond to Ran's inquiry.

"Let's just say that I want to pay a visit to an old friend."

It was a smell that drove it to do what it did that afternoon, ultimately.

Having detected the scent of its favorite food, it had followed the silver-haired human up a mountain *(A human flying? Fancy that).* It had looked on as the human visited a dark-haired associate and gave her some berries *(for use in flavored water? What silly things they drink).* It had figured to take some from the dark-haired one, but she and one other had used them quickly and left none for itself.

Still wanting the berries, it had decided to trail after Silver-Hair; she was still carrying a sufficient quantity of them to satisfy its hunger. The wily human had flown over a large lake in an attempt to ditch her pursuer, but circling around the lake took little time for someone of its ability. The human had landed outside a large building and walked inside, leaving it behind.

She still has what I want. I did not come this far just to go hungry the rest of the day. I shall have to enter her lair and take my food for myself.

There sat a reddish-haired human next to the gate, sound asleep beneath the noon sun. It paid her no mind as it paced up to the gate, appraised it, and bounded over it with only a slight effort. Nodding in determination, it continued towards the front door.

Behind the self-confident intruder, Meiling's eyes opened. An inhuman scream of challenge scattered the birds from the trees and got the visitor's attention as she somersaulted over the wall; she had no time to savor its surprise before she was upon it, fists and feet flying.

In the Mansion's foyer, Sakuya paused as Meiling's yelling reached her ears. *A challenger at this time of day? What poor soul interrupted her siesta?* She took her time walking back to the door. *Probably just some minor youkai or would-be magician. I don't think my lady would appreciate me disturbing her sleep for something as inconsequential as that...*

Opening the door, she stepped out into the courtyard...

"BLAZ-I-KENNNN!"

...uttered an "eep" and ducked as a flaming wave billowed over her head.

Once the fire extinguished itself against the Mansion's protective magic, Sakuya stood back up again. As she reassessed the situation, she shook her head. *Only in Gensokyo can you find a flaming rooster fighting a Chinese youkai in a martial arts duel,* she told herself, watching as they traded punches, kicks, and danmaku in a furious dance that took them across both ends of the courtyard.

Making her decision, Sakuya grabbed her watch and froze time around her. Not in any hurry, she traversed the halls until she reached Remilia's quarters. Allowing time to continue on as normal, she knocked on the door a few times. "My lady? Lady Remilia, are you awake?"

An ominous creaking, a soft yawn, and the padding of feet against the floor. Remilia cracked open the door, rubbing sleep from her

eyes. "Sakuya, why are you disturbing my sleep at this time of the day? This had better be good."

"I just wanted to inform you that Meiling has accepted a challenger and is currently engaged in combat, my lady," Sakuya explained. "I wasn't sure whether you wanted to watch or not."

"...Hmm... to go back to sleep or watch my favorite guard go about her work...both are enjoyable in their own ways..." Remilia murmured indecisively. "...Who's she fighting this time? Do you know?"

"A newcomer to Gensokyo, I imagine," Sakuya told her.

"Ugh..." Remilia growled, facepalming. "I wish Yakumo would understand that she can't just keep dragging people in from the outside left and right... sooner or later they end up here, and I have to put on this whole 'haughty ominous noblewoman' charade, then after some back-and-forth, including a possible confrontation with Flandre, I have to direct them to Reimu- - -"

"My lady?" Sakuya interrupted. "You asked me to stop you if you started ranting again."

"Oh... my apologies, Sakuya." Remilia covered another yawn, although the tips of her fangs were visible. "I was in the middle of a bad dream, is all..." She held up a hand to stop Sakuya's concern before it got too far. "I'll tell you about it later. Now, about that challenger?"

"Oh... yes. Meiling's combatant is a flaming chicken kickboxer."

Beat.

"...Sakuya, I'm happy that you decided to work on your sense of humor, but..."

The head maid remained silent. Remilia lowered her face towards the ground, exasparated. "You're... not making it up... are you?"

Sakuya smiled assuringly. "If I needed to do such a thing, I would not have wanted to rouse you from your slumber."

A sigh. "Fine..." Remilia conceded, grabbing a red robe and securing it as she left her quarters. "May as well get a spot of entertainment before I go back to sleep... let's go, Sakuya."

Sakuya nodded and grabbed her watch.

"GRAAAHHHHHH!"

Meiling didn't know why the animal was intent on its intrusion, and she didn't care. All that mattered to her was evicting it from the premises. As such she was still in full "berserk fury" mode, pushing the pace hard and not giving her enemy a chance to rest.

"BLAZIKEN!"

It didn't know what it had done to get on this human's bad side, or that she was something other than human. It cared only that the food it wanted was somewhere in that large building, and *she was in the way.* With a battle cry it leaped into the air and came down fast, flames flaring to life around its right foot.

Meiling met it in mid-air, her chi clashing against its fire as the Blaze Kick was countered with a Sky Dragon Kick. The two equal forces cancelled each other out with a noisy *bang,* knocking them both away. Blaziken was able to right itself before it reached the ground, skidding back some; Meiling stumbled upon landing, but recovered her footing in time.

The gatekeeper took a few seconds to recover, and her anger receded just enough for her to recognize that the creature before her was unfamiliar to her. *It doesn't give off the same vibes that a youkai normally would. What is it that I'm looking at? That its well-grounded in hand-to-hand combat is obvious, but...* She smiled, happy that she

was doing her job. *I'm still between it and the door. It shall not get away! It...* Meiling's eye twitched. What *is it doing?*

Blaziken decided that its current efforts to defeat this weird human in battle were unsatisfactory. Deciding to take it up a notch, it cracked its knuckles, tightened its fists and ***flexed.*** All throughout its body, its muscles expanded a bit and became denser, building up its strength. As it finished it struck a pose, showing off its power.

Grimacing, Meiling felt like she was looking at a Master Spark head-on; she didn't want to stare, but she couldn't look away. Willing herself to concentrate on the fight, she braced herself and focused. Her inner reserves of ki were brought to the fore, replenishing the energy she'd expended thus far and hopefully increasing her own strength to match that of the opponent's...

But the rooster didn't have the courtesy to allow her to finish her powerup before it dashed at her again. Meiling had just enough time to cross her arms in front of her face before a tremendous blow struck there, lifting her off her feet and rocketing her towards the Mansion's front doors.

Time pulsed in the Mansion's foyer. Sakuya and Remilia appeared in a white flash where there had previously been nothing. The maid was carrying Remilia's parasol in one hand; for all that it was cloudy today, the sun could make itself known at any time.

Putting her watch away, Sakuya reached out and tugged open the doors, ready to duck in case more fire was shot her way...

"WAH!"

"Wh-ooof?!"

...and was instead greeted with a wall of green and red. At the moment the doors fully opened, Meiling flew through it and crashed

into Sakuya back-first. Remilia sweatdropped as she watched the two bounce halfway across the foyer before they stopped.

The mansion's mistress walked up to them, shaking her head. She could tell that a bruise was already beginning to form on one of Meiling's arms, which had to have taken a *lot* of strength to accomplish. "Really, Meiling... next time draw it out a bit more, huh? I missed it all."

Meiling massaged her arm, looking depressed. "My apologies, mistress..."

"Get *off* of me, please."

Realizing what she was sitting on, Meiling quickly rolled off of the disgruntled maid. "Oops. Sorry, Sakuya!"

"Blaziken."

Remilia turned towards the door while the others worked themselves to their feet. She smiled. *Hmm? So she was right after all... Interesting variety of bird that we have here. An otherwise extinct species, maybe?*

The kickboxing rooster stood framed in the door, eyes not on her or on Meiling. Sakuya grabbed a few knives and a spell card, ready to attack in case the creature made any threatening moves, but a gesture from Remilia made her stay her hand. As it reached towards her, she glared coldly at the stranger who dared step this close...

...and did a double take when the rooster, instead of attacking them, grabbed the bag of berries that she hadn't yet put away. "Blaze... blazi-ken," it uttered, turning and walking away. As it left the Mansion it reached into the bag, withdrawing a handful of berries and savoring their sweet flavor as it ate.

Silence and ellipses enveloped them as they watched the bird jump back over the gate and disappear into the mist. A full minute later

Meiling was the first to speak, her jaw dropping open and her hands tightening. "Why with the... you know, if people around here actually *talked* more often...!"

Sakuya held up her hands placatingly, her weapons put away. "Easy, Meiling, calm down. I wasn't aware that I was being followed."

Remilia braced herself against the wall with one hand, unable to restrain her laughter as the two argued. *A spot of entertainment, indeed!*

Sunkern's moveset: Mega Drain, Leech Seed, Razor Leaf, Solar Beam

Approximate Level: 17

Yuuka's Notes: The Garden's newest occupant is still young and very weak, and I feel it might always be so. If it is allowed to grow this might change, but I'm not going to hold my breath. Whether it does or not, I shall keep my eyes on it for the time being.

Blaziken's moveset: Flamethrower, Bulk Up, Superpower, Blaze Kick

Approximate Level: 44

Meiling's Notes: The nerve of that bird! If it at least waited until I woke up, or if it had given some indication when we fought that it was hungry...! Ugh... well, anyway, I'll continue to do what I can to keep myself in peak condition in case it ever returns. Maybe having a sparring partner wouldn't be a bad idea... I should look into that.

Marisa, Reisen

MONSTERS IN PARADISE

Chapter Two

By: Curtis Wildcat

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Apologies for the delay. I can't speak for anyone else, but I found Reisen difficult to write for.

Spot the Bob Newhart reference in this chapter and reward yourself with a cookie.

"I love you."

For people unacquainted with romance, those words could be the most difficult things to say. They conveyed an awful lot, and the wise person knew better than to throw around those words lightly. He or she had better know what they were talking about, lest they learn the hard way what love was not and become the lead character in a televised soap opera.

"I hope you stay with me forever."

Marisa both understood what she wanted to say and the meaning that she intended to convey. Never did clearer thoughts occupy her mind.

"You can trust that I will retrieve you, should the wind blow you off."

...Or at least she *thought* she understood, considering that she was paying a visit to Dreamland. But she was sure that her hat, hanging

silently on a hook near the door halfway across the house, accepted her endearing words with grace and dignity.

It was a very good thing that no one knew what the Ordinary Magician was like outside the public eye.

At the front door, something groaned as it flew through said door without disturbing it. No one was close enough to pick up on any outspoken thoughts, but if they were, they might have heard something akin to *"lost... tired... want to sleep..."* Some noiseless shuffling, and then all was still once more.

"...Sheesh, that was quite a dream," Marisa mused as she fixed her breakfast a few hours later, becoming more awake as the minutes wore by and shaking off the last effects of sleep. "Patchy and I in some sort of magic school, her being healthy and throwing this orange ball around an arena one-handed while I'm struggling for recognition from the public..." A smirk. "I ought to run this one by them later and see what they think... still, the sooner I finish this experiment, the better. It must be messing with my mind."

"Maaaggg..."

Marisa looked up and around the room, certain that she had heard a strange noise. She went so far as to check the next room, but aside from all the stuff that she'd 'collected', she saw only her hat hanging where it was supposed to be. "Hrm... must've been the wind," she muttered as she returned to her breakfast. "Been a bit breezy out there lately... like there's a lot of changes going on, or something."

The rest of her meal was spent in an uneventful silence.

"Now, let's see..." Marisa stood before the door a while later, broom in hand. "I have some time to kill before that mixture fully settles... it's been a week or two since I last bugged Alice or Patchouli, so I suppose I could see what's on their minds... and, of course, visiting

Reimu for some afternoon tea and shooting the breeze... there's always the possibility of something new cropping up, too..." She grinned. "So many options, so little time, ze."

Deciding on a course of action, she threw open the door, grabbed her hat off its hook and placed it on her head...

"MAGIUS!"

"What the...?! Hey, get off of my- - -!"

...And blacked out as a curtain of darkness draped itself across her vision. Marisa struggled and tried to pull it off, but whatever it was that had attacked her had a death grip on her face. "Stop it! C'mon, let go! Let... go...?"

"Misss-maaaa-giiiii-usssssss...!"

Marisa's struggles ceased, her face blank. She had just had a good night's sleep and was brimming with energy, but there was something about that call that felt *fantastically* soothing...

CLUNK.

As she passed out on the floor, what Marisa had thought to be her hat pulled itself free from her head. Straightening and turning around, it expanded to its full height and hovered over her worriedly.

She didn't mean to knock her out like that, but really; that human startled her, so it was her own fault! Waking her up while she was hunkered down and resting... It wasn't her fault that her species looked like that. It was just a coincidence! Silly human! That was the last time that she'd sleep in someone's home without their knowledge. And no more traveling through colorful swirly tunnels, either. Nuh-uh!

As the Mismagius continued justifying those things to herself, she still couldn't help but concern herself with the human's well-being. The ghost Pokémon was very young, having hatched just two weeks and a day before; not long after that she had discovered a Dusk Stone entirely by accident, triggering her evolution. She had known only one human: a nice pink-haired lady who fed her every day and cared for injured Pokémon. She was thus under the assumption that there wasn't a single bitter berry in the bunch, so what right did she have to attack this one?

Mismagius sighed sadly at what she had done, deciding to make amends. Summoning what little power she had, she levitated the human's hat- - -which had been on the *next* hook over- - -and placed it on the girl's head. She wasn't sure what to do next, but then she remembered: food and drink had helped her the few times that she felt sad. Why wouldn't it be true in this case?

Her decision made, she turned and drifted off to find something to make the human feel better, unknowing of what she had caused to transpire inside Marisa's subconscious...

Marisa wasn't sure what had happened. One minute she was getting ready to visit Alice, and the next she was standing on a grassy plain. No mountains or trees, nothing; just miles of grass and clear blue sky. It was very quiet... one could say almost *too* quiet. "Weird. What's going on here?"

"Marisa."

The magician whirled around at the voice, but stopped and settled down when she saw who it was. "Oh; it's you. What brings you to my corner of paradise, Patchy?" she asked with a grin.

"It's nothing much." The librarian fidgeted with her cap, clearly nervous as she kept her distance. "It's just... well, I've been doing some thinking recently about your repeated thefts from the library."

" *Borrowing,* ze. Anyway, you were saying?"

"It occurred to me that you would not have done so without a good reason. Your tenacity is to be admired... it's a trait that I find lacking in myself. Please continue your visits where possible."

Marisa smiled, but she couldn't *quite* shake the feeling that something was off. "Flattery will get you somewhere, but you didn't come here just to tell me that. Is something wrong?"

Patchouli flinched. "...Am I really that transparent?"

"Like glass."

"...Well, yes. I wanted to find an appropriate way to thank you, so I did as much research as I could. Thankfully, a foreign cat youkai I'd met gave me the inspiration I needed. As it was I'd spent the better part of the afternoon preparing this."

That dangerous feeling was getting stronger. "Well? Is it something edible or isn't it?"

"It's not edible, but I think you'll like this just the same." Patchouli blushed and smiled, probably feeling pleased with herself for confessing...

...And with a flick of her fingers, a Spell Card materialized in her hand. " *Koakuma Sign: Precision Cow Strike!"*

A sweatdrop. "What...?!"

At a yell of *"Milllll!"* , she looked up. There was Koakuma up there, smiling and waving apologetically... and lo and behold, Marisa could see a pink cow with a comically frightened expression on its face, dropping end over end away from the assistant towards her! Not wasting time contemplating the absurdity of this situation, the magician hopped onto her broom and jetted away...

An explosion rocked the world.

With a sudden yell the human sat up. Mismagius recoiled in surprise, almost knocking over the cup that was next to her on the kitchen table. Maybe carrying her in here hadn't been very smart of her, but...

"...Ugh. What in blazes?" Marisa growled, the last images of that vision fading. "Weirdness is one thing, but this goes beyond weird." Seeing Mismagius hovering a short distance away, her eyes dilated for just a moment before she pointed a finger at her. " *It was you, ghosty!"*

I didn't mean it! Mismagius shrieked telepathically, hiding underneath the table as if she thought it would help her any. *Please don't point at me!*

"What...?" Marisa stooped down, glaring at her suspiciously. "Can't you speak normally? I'd like to win these head games, not lose 'em!"

Mismagius continued as if she hadn't heard her. *I didn't mean to knock you out! I was sound asleep, and the next thing I knew I was being shoved onto your head! Please don't be mad at me, but that really hurts and I don't like it when someone is mad at me, it makes me all sad and stuff-*

" **HEY!"** Marisa interrupted loudly, bringing an end to the creature's babbling. The way the thing was going on, she would've thought it was a fairy in a cheap disguise, the telepathy notwithstanding; its protests sounded way too childish. "Slow down! I can't understand you at all, ze!"

Mismagius shivered, but stopped whining and calmed down. Marisa made sure her mini-hakkero was still on her person, then addressed her again. "Alright. Now then, explain. Unless you want to join the sun as a daytime star."

I'd... I'd gone in here last night to sleep... I've never been so far from home before, the ghost-like creature explained, shivering again. She

settled onto the floor, most of her lower body (such as it was) folding beneath her until everything below her neck was out of sight. With that done and its head tilted down, it really did look a lot like a large hat.

"Mm-hm." Marisa nodded slightly. "And it never occurred to you to *knock?* "

Mismagius looked befuddled. *What does 'knock' mean? And how do you do it?*

*She's asking **me?*** Marisa thought. "Forget it." The magician stood up and stretched; when a familiar smell hit her nostrils she looked down at the table, seeing the cup for the first time. "Hey, is that tea?"

Uh-huh! The 'ghosty' flew back into view and floated over the cup of tea proudly. *The nice lady who feeds me makes some every day. I got it myself!*

"Uh...huh." Marisa continued to regard the tea, stopping herself for the moment from just drinking it. "You didn't put any poison in there, did you?"

Poison? That icky stuff that living gas clouds throw up? Mismagius actually frowned at this. *That's sick. No, the tea's okay. I even drank some myself, and I'm still alive!*

"Nice choice of words, ze."

Marisa gave the tea a bit of thought. Whatever this animal, fairy, youkai, or whatever it was wanted, it seemed earnest. Reimu probably would've outright blasted it for causing trouble, but she was no Reimu; and the thing seemed eager to please, as if it wanted to be told what to do. *Huh... a servant, maybe?...*

...Eh, I'll think about it later. Let's see if it botched up the tea. Clutching the cup in her hands, she brought it up to her lips and sipped...

And gave a start as her senses tingled, sparks running through her veins. "...Zesty!" she exclaimed, smiling for the first time since the creature had woken her. She took another sip, taking a few moments to savor the taste. "This is delicious stuff, ze!"

Mismagius tilted itself a degree, curious. *Does it really taste that good? When I tried it, there wasn't anything great about it.*

"It's an acquired taste, and you're young. Don't worry about it."

'Ac-quired'?

"Never mind." Another sip. "Where'd you get this?"

A happy smile. *From that big black bowl thingy in the next room. There was already hot water in it, so...*

Marisa's eyes widened. She had just enough time to utter an "aw, crud" before a cloud of white sparkles wrapped around her. Mismagius yelped as the same thing happened to her. *What is this? What's happening?!*

"That wasn't tea water you grabbed- - -WHOA!" Marisa found herself airborne without any input from her. She struggled to put herself down, knocking over the cup of "tea" in doing so, only to find herself levitating towards Mismagius instead. "That was a new potion I was putting together! It wasn't even supposed to be finished until this afternoon!"

The frightened creature didn't even think to ask what a 'potion' was, nor would it have had the time to. As soon as they came into contact with each other, there was a blinding flash. Hidden in the light, their respective molecules broke apart and went about rearranging themselves...

Calmness in the library, one of the very best things that Patchouli could ask for. No sign of Marisa, no Flandre barging in to declare to

her that she'd learned something interesting... just nice, quiet research.

She'd heard of the ruckus outside, of course: how the rooster had gotten the best of Meiling in an attempt to invade the Mansion, and the subsequent brightening of her friend's day. Remilia had directed Patchouli to do what she could to find out what kind of bird it was; Koakuma was thus tracking down some books in the far ends of the library that might or might not hold the answers she wanted. One batch was currently being worked through, while the other was en route. *Solving problems is part of my job, and it's what I enjoy doing.*

"Patchouli? Hey, Patchy?"

Patchouli didn't turn when Marisa's voice interrupted her. It was inevitable; as soon as she thought about how nice it was not to have the annoying thief visit her for a change, there she was. She frowned. "Go away, black-white. Bother Flandre or something, but don't bother me."

A whine. "Patchyyyy..."

"Look, I don't care how many times you say that you just want to borrow something. I don't want to hear your claims that you'll return my belongings when you die. I just want you to *go away* and leave me be. Is that so much to ask for?"

"C'm *on* , Patchy. This is kinda important, ze."

" *What do you want?* " Patchouli finally snapped, turning around. "Don't you have anything better to do thaaa *aaackk!* " She jumped in surprise, almost falling out of her chair at the sight she beheld. "... Is... that you, Marisa?"

What floated before her had Marisa's face, hat and some of her hair, but her body from mid-neck down was nothing more than a writhing black dress with red jewels embedded in it. Her expression was

halfway between distraught and annoyed. "A little help here, please? I seem to have bonded with a ghost hat."

Ludicrously... Appropriate... Payback!

"Pffft...!"

There was a *thump* as the chair Patchouli was in fell over. The library was graced with a phenomenon that was only interrupted when it became necessary for her to breathe. "EH-HAHAHAHAHAHA~!"

'Marismagius' sweatdropped at the laughter. "Um... congratulations?"

-GAP-

The air split open, and Yukari stepped out onto a grassy path; almost as soon as her feet touched the ground, the portal behind her irised shut. An unpleasant force pushed down on her, settling around her pores, and she inhaled sharply. "There it is again..." she hissed. "This feels too stifling... it doesn't bother my flight or my natural strength, just my boundary manipulation, but it's still..."

Yukari shook her head slightly, straightening. *It doubtless has something to do with the physics of this world... but without consulting a specialist, I can only speculate. And speculation is something I don't have time for.* She looked around, searching for witnesses to her arrival; finding naught but a few wide-eyed Taillow and Linoone, she lifted off a few feet and took in her surroundings.

A desert to the distant south, and a volcano to the far west. Somewhere around ten miles away was a town, its population likely around three thousand or so. Yukari raised an eyebrow. *Seems the place had grown since I was last here. I wonder if that couple still lives there, and if they kept their promise... or if they're even still alive. It **has** been fifteen years...*

A grimace. *Well, only one way to find out. For now, I'd best not fly and draw attention to myself. Time to hoof it.*

Adjusting her cap a bit, she walked towards the town and tried to ignore the instinctive urge to fall asleep beneath the nearest tree.

-GAP-

About five hours passed.

It was a bit nice, Yukari supposed, to walk through a town and not have the people be suspicious of you. Normally she couldn't go anywhere in Gensokyo without someone being on edge; she was aware that a new title, "The Lazy Trickster", was starting to make the rounds. As a side note, she wished that whoever it was that had come up with that hadn't bothered; "Border of Phantasm" sounded much more ominous. And as Sanae probably would've put it, it was much cooler, too.

Maybe this little sojourn will dispel the "Lazy" in "Lazy Trickster". Little comedians, the whole lot of them...

No one in town paid her much mind; even her eye color didn't attract any attention. She was just another travelling trainer to them, perhaps wanting to head to Lavaridge or get a glass item made from the volcano's ashes. One or two people she didn't recognize waved hello, to which she answered with a polite nod. *If memory serves, the dwelling should be right around this block...*

The one-story home that she had expected to see was recognizable, but it had undergone a few cosmetic changes; there were a few bushes leading up to the door, the structure had been painted a light yellow instead of orange, and all the cracked windows had been replaced. The name on the mailbox was the same, though, so unless someone else had moved in and just hadn't changed the plate yet, Yukari was at the right place. Walking up to the door, she knocked on it a few times and waited. *Hopefully they're home. I'd like to be able to sit down for a bit.*

It took a few seconds for someone to answer. Faintly Yukari could hear some footsteps approaching the door, and a bit of rattling as the door was unlocked. Finally a gray-haired man of above-average height, size, and musculature swung open the door. "Yes? How can I- - -?!"

Yukari smiled as the man's eyes widened; he recognized her, alright. The nice part was that life had not yet begun to best him, as he still looked very healthy for someone who had to be in his late sixties by now. "Kevin Layden? I do believe your wife owes me a few baked rolls from last time."

Kevin ignored the comment, a broad grin spanning his face. He gestured at the home's interior and made way for her. "Yukari! Wonderful seeing you again! Come on in, come on in!"

Yukari accepted the offer and entered.

-GAP-

"Wasn't sure if you'd remember me after fifteen years," the youkai admitted as she sipped from a cup of tea in the living room shortly thereafter. "What with how much the town has changed, I thought your memories would follow suit."

"You're a hard person to forget." Kevin removed a pair of glasses from his shirt pocket and put them on. "Why, I daresay you haven't changed at all!"

"I'll take that as a compliment." Yukari moved one hand to the back of her head, smothering the sweatdrop that had sprouted there. "You certainly haven't lost your sense of humor. So, is Harmony in?"

"She's out at her bakery in the marketplace." Kevin sat down in a chair, having been a bit preoccupied to do so up until then. "She should be there now if you want to speak to her."

"I can wait until she returns. This isn't as important as her business." Another sip. "How about Vulpix? How is she doing?"

Kevin shook his head. "Doing just fine, or as close to 'fine' as someone of her nature ever gets. The little fox can't stand being out of someone's sight for more than a second."

"Loneliness will do that to a soul, I'm afraid."

"Yes." Kevin stared at Yukari over his own teacup. "She's missed you, you know. You showed up in the pup's life and disappeared after roughly three months... your vanishing act was one of Hoenn's biggest mysteries for years. Vulpix was heavily depressed for the first few weeks afterward."

Yukari looked down at her reflection in the tea. "I didn't really have much choice in the matter."

"So you've said." The man frowned. "When Harmony returns, you'll have to give us the full explanation for that."

"I don't really know how much I should talk about- - -"

"Yukari, for all the length of time that you spent in town, none of us know anything about you. Nothing about where you came from, why you were passed out at Mt. Chimney, how you seemed to disappear into thin air at the end of your stay... I can't speak for my wife or Vulpix, but I would personally like to have this mystery cleared up."

The room was silent as Yukari continued to regard her tea, her expression conflicted. "...I'll try to explain things the best I can. All I ask is that you please not hold my vanishing act against me."

Kevin sipped his tea, staying quiet a few beats before he smiled. "I think that can be managed. Want to say hello to Vulpix while we wait for my wife?"

A shrug, and a smile of her own. "Sure. Why not?"

Kevin got up, setting down his tea on the table, and left the room. The back door was heard opening, and the sound of his voice echoed back to Yukari a few moments later: "Hey, runt! Get your tails in here. There's a certain woman here who wants to say hello to you!"

Something howled delightedly outside, and the *patter-patter* of furred feet hitting the floor was the only signal Yukari received that something was amiss. She scarcely had enough time to set her tea down when a yellowish-white form landed squarely on her chest, simultaneously knocking the wind out of her and toppling over both youkai and chair.

Kevin re-entered the room upon hearing the impacts, his arms folded and that grin on his face again. "Yukari, say hello to *Ninetales."*

One of Yukari's hands lifted up, an index finger partly raised. "A lot heavier than they look, aren't they, Kevin?"

Ninetales was too busy giving Yukari's face an enthusiastic washing to answer.

A brownish, furred form flitted through the Bamboo Forest of the Lost.

There wasn't any real danger; the many lifeforms that hid there were content to observe it from afar. The skies were clear, leaving nothing detrimental in sight. The way was free of obstacles, and that meant that the Eevee could focus on its goals: figuring out where it was, what it could safely eat, and how it could get home if need be.

Eevee hadn't seen any other Pokémon in the short time it had been here, which was all well and good. It was a loner at heart, choosing to despise the company of others even as it sought a trainer worthy of it. That particular mission was complicated, though, by its own blatant dismissal of humanity. Eevee was cursed, so to speak, with

bad timing; it had been alive for two years, and never once had it encountered a trainer that met its lofty standards (although it knew they existed; from afar it had once witnessed a dark-skinned human sparring with a Conkeldurr and taking his loss in stride, and had recognized his qualities for what they were).

The point is, Eevee was entirely self-sufficient and it knew it, but it did not want to remain so forever. There *had* to be someone who had what it took to bring out its inner strengths. *Is it my destiny to be sought after by fools and imbeciles who can't even take care of themselves, let alone their Pokémon? They wouldn't know humility if they were slapped with it! Why can't I ever meet another human that isn't a sour berry at heart? If none will show themselves to me... then I may as well not submit myself to them at all!*

However, time- - -and Tewi Inaba- - -was about to provide Eevee with a loophole. As it continued its dash through the Forest's many narrow passages, heading for who knows where, it placed its feet down on a recently-disturbed patch of grass. The forest floor unexpectedly gave way, and with an unnerved shriek the Eevee lost its balance and plummeted into the depths of a concealed pit.

"Hm?"

Somewhere within Eientei, Reisen looked up from the low table she was seated at, the tips of her ears twitching a little. All of her duties for the day were finished for the moment, and she and Eirin were taking a few moments to enjoy a round of mahjongg before the latter retired for the evening. Granted the moon rabbit wasn't doing as well as she would like, but it was the thought that counted.

Reisen recognized the yell's tone; she regularly did the same thing whenever one of Tewi's practical jokes caught her off guard. She jumped to her feet. "Master, could you excuse me a few moments?"

Eirin occasionally had her own fun at Reisen's expense, but she knew that her long ears weren't for decoration; if she'd heard

something suspicious, she knew better than to question her. "Is something wrong, Udonge?"

"We have a visitor... and an unhappy one, I think."

Eirin waved her off. "Go on ahead. And don't forget to be hospitable if it's someone we know."

Reisen chuckled weakly, but nodded and flew out of the room. She wasn't always the best around people, but she knew better than to antagonize them.

Another day come and gone, like the hundreds of thousands before them.

After Reisen left, Eirin allowed her thoughts to drift. Mortals, including those who were long-lived but whose lifespans fell far short of *Remilia's* , let alone her own, often had little to no accurate picture of 'forever'. What was twenty years before a lifetime? What was a lifetime before a dynasty? What was a dynasty before a millennia? What was a millennia before... and the chain would go on. Having looked after Kaguya for centuries, and having lived for ages before that, she felt that she had as close of a picture of it as was possible.

And that picture, to her distaste, had been loaded with monotony. Changes were in order from time to time, lest she or Kaguya seek out 'creative' ways to cure their boredom. On one occasion, Eirin took one of her "nightmare pills" before going to bed; after dreaming about color-coded copies of Yuyuko chasing her around a maze, she realized that other alternatives had to be sought.

Eirin liked to learn, to put her knowledge to work; the 'Brain of the Moon' didn't earn her title by being lazy, after all, and practicing medicine was her way of benefiting those she met. Through her practice, she had met numerous kinds of both humans and youkai: the nice, the mean, the strange, the mentally insane, those driven by negative emotions... and a few, like Marisa Kirisame's father, who

were complete oddballs on the surface but had otherwise clear minds. While she'd been in seclusion, it couldn't be said that she hadn't experienced a lot-...

"Master? Help."

The Lunarian looked up as Reisen, grimacing in pain, re-entered the room. Attached to her left ear, teeth sunk in, was a little growling brown ball of fluff. Eirin sweatdropped. *Along that train of thought, I suppose there's no better way to cure boredom than to meet something or someone new...*

"Is it going to be alright?"

Eirin didn't look up, busy as she was with treating the little animal's injury. "It should be," she said, keeping her words simple for Reisen's sake; the moon rabbit tried, she really did, but she still didn't have a thorough understanding of medical terminology. "You said you found it in one of Tewi's pitfall traps, correct? From what I can discern, it just landed wrong. The fall from that height must've been a bit much for its muscles to handle, but as long as it rests and stays still, it should be fine by mid-morning."

Reisen nodded, still looking a touch concerned. One hand went up to ear, feeling the bandage there. "And my ear? You still haven't told me what I should do about it, master."

"I suggest a heavy dose of painkillers and bedrest, Udonge," Eirin answered, smiling thinly as she finished her work.

"For an *ear bite?* " Reisen blurted out, disbelieving. "Are you *serious?* "

"Not entirely." Reisen tilted sideways a few degrees, but Eirin wasn't finished speaking. "This creature's fangs are tiny, but strong. I needed to apply pliers before I could safely dislodge it and treat the wound. That should tell you something."

The animal smiled, seeming almost proud. Reisen ignored it, frowning. "What *should* it be telling me? That I shouldn't be putting my face near a wild youkai's teeth?"

"That, and getting an earring just became a bit cheaper."

Reisen pouted and looked away, instead choosing to give the patient a more thorough look. There was any number of youkai who called the Bamboo Forest home aside from the rabbits, but she decided she hadn't lived here long enough if she didn't know what type it was. "So... what kind of youkai is this, master?"

Eirin, who had been giving the pleased animal a light scratching behind the ears, paused. "Hmm... I thought it was a tiny fox at first, but now I'm starting to wonder..."

The creature looked up at her curiously. "Eev?" it squeaked.

"From its face, I'd thought it was a rare breed of rabbit," Reisen brought up. "But that can't be right... it has that collar of fur around its neck, and the thick pointed tail..."

"You're both wrong," Kaguya's voice interrupted. Those in the room looked up as the door slid open, allowing the exiled princess to enter. "It should be a given that it's a kedama."

Eirin blinked at both her entry and her claim. "Well, yes. That *would* be a given, but it doesn't really have the same *form...* "

"Look at it." Kaguya walked up to them, stooping down to bring herself to the creature's level. "It's small. It's fuzzy. It's cute. It even has that weird expression on its face. What else would it be *but* a kedama?"

Reisen sweatdropped. "I don't think you should go around claiming that without knowing for sure, Princess Kaguya... It's not like we've had too many of those around here."

The animal didn't seem to care what Kaguya thought of it, opening its mouth wide in a yawn as it exhibited complete disinterest... and expelling a large bubble from its mouth. The others watched it as it floated towards Kaguya in slow motion; the princess looked at it curiously, transfixed... until it popped on contact with her face. Murmuring tiredly, she sunk to the floor and fell asleep without any further ado.

"Uh... what? Princess? Come on, who said you could sleep in here? Wake up, please!" Reisen protested, trying to rouse her unsuccessfully.

Eirin looked between Kaguya and the creature a few times, an eyebrow raised, before settling on the latter. "I knew yawning was contagious, but I don't think that's *quite* the spirit of the expression," she uttered. "Udonge? Excuse me?"

Reisen looked up. "Yes, master?"

"I'd like you to get acquainted with our little friend here, at least until we can decide for sure what it is. What I would *especially* like for you to do would be to ensure that it's truly harmless. If it is, wonderful. If not..."

"Ee-vee," the animal growled, probably put off at the implication that it was anything *but* harmless.

"..." A slow nod as Eirin's steel tone settled onto Reisen's mind. "I understand, master; I can do that. What about you?"

Eirin smiled sunnily. "Me? I'm going to bed, of course. Sweet dreams, Udonge!" she declared, exiting the room and turning left out of view.

Reisen's jaw dropped; if she had been looking at her new charge, she would've seen that same expression on its own face. "Say *what?!"*

" *Veeee?!"*

A few beats, then Eirin poked her head back into the room, still beaming. "Oh, and lest I forget, getting up in the middle of mahjongg counts as a forfeit. I win again."

"Master, just go to bed already!"

It had taken considerable time for "Udonge" to get settled down after that, but those minutes were spent carrying (read: dragging) "Kaguya" to her room and figuring out what Eevee liked to eat. Thankfully, there had been no sign of the person who had set that trap, and the little Pokémon wasn't picky about its food. Enough time had gone by for both parties to fully calm down.

Something about these people had gotten Eevee's senses tingling ever since the rabbit-eared being had jumped into the pit to pull it out. If it had ever met a youkai prior to today, it would've been more suspicious. Instead, Eevee was more curious than anything else. The residents here looked human (mostly), but there was just enough of a difference in scent to make the Pokémon wonder. *If they aren't human, then what are they? And why does this one have those strange ears?*

Eevee could still feel the pain from its awkward landing earlier, so even without the silver-haired lady's instructions it felt no need to move around much. It and Udonge were sitting just outside the front door (the former allowing itself to be carried there), enjoying the light breeze and the view.

And what a view it was! A cloudless night, with no sign of precipitation. The sky was liberally sprinkled with stars, surrounding the faraway moon. From where the duo sat the satellite seemed larger than life, taking up four times more room than it should've been and permitting it to be viewed in greater detail. The **thuds** from somewhere close by, which Eevee would later come to learn were

the local rabbit youkai hard at work, served to make the sight more awe-inspiring. The sight was such that it couldn't help but smile.

Eevee looked up at Udonge's face to see what she thought of the sight, but it hadn't quite managed to look her in the eyes before they closed tight. *What's the big deal?* it thought in wonderment. *Why won't she let me focus on her?* It reached out with a paw, tapping the strange-eared girl's hand. "Eev? Ee-vee?"

"What is it?" Udonge asked. "And... please don't look me in the eyes when you talk."

"Ee *-vee?"* the Pokémon asked, a bit indignant as it turned its head away. *Why? Is it rude?*

"If you're asking me why not... well, it's for your own safety." Udonge still wouldn't open her eyes.

"Eev?"

"Well, I'm..." Udonge blushed a little. "I guess the word for it would be 'anti-social'. I'm not at my best around people I'm not acquainted with. I have these powers, you see, and they're tied directly to my eyes..."

Eevee stayed quiet and listened as the odd-eared girl explained her powers in detail. Manipulation of waves, including brain waves and such, the means by which she could induce insanity in others... it sounded a lot like the attacks and abilities of a Pokémon. *But that can't be right; I know there are some that resemble humans, but she's* ***too*** *human-looking. On the other paw, she doesn't quite have the right scent for a human... which is she? Or is she something else altogether?*

"...so the whole point of this is that I don't want to mess with your mind," Udonge was saying, wrapping up her explanation. "Something I know from experience is that if it happens, people start getting angry... and I'd really like to avoid violence if I could." Her

voice dropped in volume a few levels. "Who knows what you'd think of me then..."

"Eev..." Eevee's ears twitched as it caught that last sentence. *Hey, don't get all depressed on me. Just because you're afraid of misusing your powers doesn't mean you can't... huh...?*

The Pokémon paused, distracted by the moon's brightness. As it sat and regarded it, Eevee thought about just how much the situation required it to adapt... and in turn, it brought to mind what it knew of its species. *The moon... one of our evolutions has something to do with the moon. Mama and papa were never clear about what, exactly... Pokémon know more about evolution than the humans ever will, but I for one don't know* ***enough.*** *Still, the moon is out and casting its glory down on us. There has to be something else that triggers an evolution in conjunction with it...*

It looked up at Udonge, considering what she had just told it about her abilities. The somewhat-human had her head turned away, staring at nothing in particular. *Wave manipulation? I wonder if she just might be able to help me after all...*

Deciding to test its hypothesis and hoping that Udonge wouldn't hold the pain against it, Eevee gave the girl's hand a sharp nip.

"YII-!"

Reisen jerked her hand away, immediately turning to face the little creature. "Ow! Hey, what gives? You didn't have to bite me!" she protested, grabbing it and holding it in a way that it couldn't bite her again. "Why did you - - -... ...oh. Oh, *dear."*

Too late, Reisen noticed that her companion had looked up at her as soon as she'd started to complain; its brown eyes had locked on to the moon rabbit's bright red eyes. She paled as she felt the creature's brain waves twist a little and watched its eyes squeeze

shut; she realized that she had unleashed the moon's power on it without meaning to. *This is not going to turn...*

...out...

Something clicked. The animal's eyes opened, staring confidently into Reisen's own and making her forget her fears...

...well?

"Eeeee... ***VEEEEEEEEEEE!"***

"WHA?!" Reisen yelped, almost dropping the creature as it became aglow with energy and light. Streamers of power encircled it protectively, casting their illumination on the bamboo and Eientei's exterior. The energies didn't seem to be hurting her, passing through her harmlessly; most likely they were just cosmetic in nature. From somewhere up above, a quiet "Whoa" could be heard from Tewi; she had to have been watching from the roof the entire time.

As Reisen shut one eye and struggled to discern anything at all through the other, she felt the animal begin to change shape. About twenty kilos were added to its weight. A vague outline that she had figured to be its mane disappeared. Its legs lengthened. Its tail narrowed, then followed suit. Its head and neck readjusted itself... and with a loud *whoosh* , the energies faded and disappeared, leaving an awe-filled Reisen to examine what she was now holding.

Fur as black as midnight, broken only by yellow rings on its forehead, ears, tail and legs. *The overall shape, those brilliantly red irises... if I didn't know better, I'd say I was looking at a fellow lunar rabbit! What happened? Did my ability cause it to transform somehow?* she wondered, not knowing that she was the first of Gensokyo's residents to witness a Pokémon's evolution. She was also unaware that what had happened was an unorthodox method of triggering said evolution, but no one was there to tell her that.

The "rabbit" twisted a bit in Reisen's grasp, licking the bite mark on her hand in an attempt to soothe the pain. It then gazed up into her eyes, feeling no fear at all from that visage, and mewled what had to have been a question. "Umbreon?"

"I'm... alright," Reisen told it reassuringly. She gently placed the creature down next to her, scratching it between the ears. "I'm just surprised that things turned out like this... How did you do that? What are you, really?" She shook her head and smiled. "Don't know *how* I'm going to get any sleep tonight, thinking about all this..."

The rabbit-like animal solved that problem for her by yawning another one of those bubbles right in its face. Intense drowsiness overwhelmed Reisen, like Kaguya before her; she fell onto her back, out like a light, and commenced snoring. Unheard by her was the giggling from the roof, where Tewi found this funny and made little effort to hide it.

Umbreon settled down next to Udonge, disregarding the laughter it was hearing; if whoever was doing that was threatening, it would've known by now. And it wasn't eager to fight anything, not with an injured leg.

Looking down at the girl's sleeping face, the Pokémon evaluated her and considered the qualities she'd shown since they'd first met. *The victim of many jokes, but trusted to handle important tasks. ...Anti-social by her own admission, but doesn't go out of her way to bother others of her kind. ...And even if she was under orders, she was willing to keep her powers under wraps to protect me. She's not the kind who would abuse others, and she seems very down to earth.*

But at the same time, she doesn't know what a Pokémon is or what the connection is between us and humans. Can I really count on her to strengthen me, to help me battle against friends and foes alike? ...Am I going to regret staying here when the possibility of me being the only one of my kind here is a strong one?

...Guess I'll have to find out the hard way.

Permitting itself to rest, Umbreon closed its eyes and let the constant background noise lull it to sleep. It would regret it in the morning, when it would find out that Tewi had put a fake mustache and beard on it while it was unaware, but for now there was only peace.

Mismagius's moveset: Spite, Psychic, Magical Leaf, Astonish

Approximate Level: 2

Marisa's Notes: SUPER annoying. Bad enough that I had to ask Patchouli for help in separating us- - -no arms, and all that- - -but this ghost hat's following me everywhere. If I wanted a pet I should've asked for a cat, ze! At least it's not getting in the way of my work anymore, but the sooner it leaves, the better.

Umbreon's moveset: Yawn, Quick Attack, Faint Attack, Growl

Approximate Level: 21

Reisen's Notes: And so Eientei has gotten a new resident. Eirin was surprised in the morning to find out that the creature gained its adult form via my eyes... maybe intentionally, maybe not. We know that it's female, but nothing else is forthcoming. Until we *do* learn more, we're just going to call her "Swift" and be done with it.

Reimu, Chen, Flandre

MONSTERS IN PARADISE

Chapter Three

By: Curtis Wildcat

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Spot the *Space Ghost Coast To Coast* shout-out in this chapter and have yourself some barbecued shrimp.

The chapters keep getting bigger. I hadn't anticipated this. Huh... anyway, I was in a bit of a rush to finish this today; I've kept you guys waiting long enough. If I see anything that needs fixed, particularly towards the end, I'll take care of it during the next update.

"...So, that's pretty much the entire story, Reimu."

"Huh... well, it explains what I've heard from Marisa and Remilia, at any rate... they've been seeing similar creatures popping up here and there."

Reimu leaned back, staring up at the clear skies over the shrine. A short time past Ran had paid her an unexpected visit, with Chen and a strange cat youkai in tow. Over tea, the kitsune told her how they had discovered the cat, Yukari's belief that it was not native to this world, and the overseer's subsequent decision to travel and investigate the matter personally. Until further notice, she was told, life would continue on as normal; neither the cat nor the other animals that had been discussed over the grapevine bothered anyone outside of self-defense.

Ignoring the playful cries of Chen and the cat as they pursued each other around the shrine grounds, Reimu allowed her thoughts to drift. Genji had decided to sit in on the conversation, and was even willing to have some tea for himself; the shrine maiden had placed a cup- - -originally reserved for Marisa, who hadn't shown up at all- - -before him, then had dismissed him out of her mind up until now. If he wanted to stick around and listen, that was fine with her; but if he wasn't going to contribute anything to their discussion, she intended to ignore him.

For a moment, though, she wondered how life had been treating Genji since they had last met. At some point between the battle against Shinki and the Scarlet Mist incident, Reimu had finally mastered flight; since she was no longer in need of his services, Genji had elected to retire and spend his days at a small lake near the shrine until such a time that Reimu appointed a successor for the Hakurei line. She had not heard from him since, and she'd assumed that old age had finally claimed him. Apparently it hadn't.

Ran watched her shikigami at play for a little while. Her mouth opened and closed a few times, looking as if she wanted to say something but wasn't quite sure *how* to say it. Finally the kitsune gave up and turned to Reimu. "Excuse me, but..."

"Yeah, Ran?"

"What's that turtle doing sitting next to you?"

Reimu waved off her curiosity. "That's just Genji. I told you and Yukari about him before, remember?"

"Yes... your means of transportation before you learned to fly." Ran raised a finger, tapping her chin with it. "But I was under the impression that Genji was an old bearded turtle..."

"..." Reimu froze. "You're saying it's not Genji? Then... who was it I was giving tea to?"

Slowly, the shrine maiden turned to her left. Sitting there was a large blue turtle with two metal protusions sticking out of its shoulders. The turtle had the cup of tea clenched between its front feet, and was sipping from it. After a little bit of this, it set the tea down, turned towards Reimu and gave her a thumbs-up. "Blastoise."

Reimu shrieked in surprise and jumped to her feet, ofuda already in her hand. "...! What the...?! What are you, and what are you doing here?!"

Ran hung her head, shaking it slowly. "It has begun..."

Chen and the cat had reacted to the turtle's presence as well, but in different ways. On hearing Ran's exasparation, the shikigami had edged over to her master in case she had orders to give. *Better to be safe than sorry,* she had decided.

The yellow-orange cat sensed Chen's distress and decided that he didn't want to disappoint his new friend. Deciding that none of the three looked qualified to give him orders as trainers, he assumed a battle-ready position and meowed: ***/-You! Did you come here to disturb us?*** -/

/- **I could ask the same of you, fancy-fur,** -/ Blastoise rumbled, setting aside the now-empty cup. The Pokémon was completely uncaring of both the cat's and the human's threatening postures. /- **You're the first one I've seen here since I was forcibly removed from my home. It is easy to think that you're the one disturbing *me.*** -/

/- **I didn't even know you were here until the red-white human discovered you!** -/ Delcatty growled, tail twitching. /- **Don't give me that garbage!** -/

"Translation: 'the innocent bystanders are completely confused, and we don't care'," the 'red-white human' complained. "Does anyone understand *what* they're saying to each other?"

"I think the cat's upset at being bothered, and he's calling out the turtle on it," Chen mused. "I'm probably wrong... the dialect's kinda weird..."

Everything else that Delcatty's friend was saying was drowned out by Blastoise's reply. /- **I was behaving myself just fine; I'm not out to cause trouble. You'd do well not to overreact.** -/

/- **Overreact? OVERREACT?!** -/ Delcatty hissed, its flur fluffing up. /- **Get out here right now. I'll *show* you an overreaction!** -/

"... *Aaaaand* he just challenged it to a fight," Chen explained, ears drooping.

"Not on my porch, its not," the human declared, brandishing an odd stick threateningly. "I've had this shrine repaired and rebuilt enough times already. If you're going to fight, do it *away* from the building!"

Blastoise looked at the human out the corner of its eye. Delcatty could see the gears turning in the Pokémon's head as it determined what to say; Miss Red-White didn't look really threatening at all, even with the stick, so to it obeying the threat was optional. Therefore, he wasn't surprised when Blastoise withdrew its limbs and head into its shell and stayed put.

A vein above the human's eye pulsed. "I said *off!"* she yelled, walking over and delivering a swift kick to the back of Blastoise's shell. Delcatty flinched, expecting her to cry out in pain, but did a double-take when Blastoise was obligingly booted out onto the grass; the abrupt ejection from the porch had startled the turtle Pokémon too, if the off-put grumbling was any sort of proof.

"...Reimu, that may not have been a wise thing to do," Ran informed her, sweatdropping. "If it wasn't hostile before, it will be now."

"Did *you* have any suggestions on how to deal with an intrusive tea-drinking turtle?"

"Well, no..."

"Didn't think so."

Delcatty overcame his surprise as Blastoise righted itself and pushed itself back up onto its feet. /- **Troublesome human...** -/ it groused. /- **Does *anyone* know what 'respect your elders' means around here?** -/

/- **More like common sense is in short supply in these parts,** -/ Delcatty suggested, ignoring Chen's indignant exclamation. /- **But since you're over here now, can we just fight? I made that big show of anger a minute ago, and I want to have something to show for it.** -/

/- **Tch...** -/ Blastoise reluctantly aimed its cannons at Delcatty. /- **Fine. I have a long day of relaxation to get back to, so let's be quick about it.** -/

"Yeah! Go for it, Creampuff!" Chen cheered, one hand in the air. "You can do it! Go get 'em!"

"...Creampuff...?" Ran mouthed inaudibly, her lips twitching upwards.

Reimu's left eyebrow disappeared into her hair. "Creampuff?"

/- **...Creampuff?** -/ Delcatty asked out of pure confusion.

/- **Creeeeeampuff,** -/ Blastoise uttered, partially confirming the term but also expressing its own minor disbelief.

Chen frowned when everyone's eyes directed themselves towards her. "...What? It's a cute name. I like it."

The newly-christened Creampuff sighed, bracing himself for battle. /- **Chen, you've got a lot to learn. C'mon, Blastoise; lets show them how we do things back home.** -/

/- **Agreed.** -/

Blastoise kicked things off with a bang, two high-pressure water jets bursting from its cannons. The things weren't big on accuracy, though, and Creampuff was able to twist himself out of their way in time. Deciding to give the turtle a taste of its own technique, the cat glowed with a soft light... and spat out a watery beam of his own. Blastoise quickly withdrew into its shell, though, and effectively nullified the ersatz Hydro Pump via type resistance and just flat-out being strong defensively.

Chen ducked behind Ran's tails as some of the water splashed too close for her liking. "Hey, be careful with that!" she warned.

/- **Sorry!** -/ Creampuff meowed, occupied with dodging another shot of Blastoise's favored attack. In retaliation, he opened his mouth and fired a crackling whitish-blue beam at one of his opponent's cannons. A misshapen lump of ice formed around it, freezing it solid.

"Huh..." Reimu was watching closely, interested despite herself. "Not a bad strategy. Keep it from firing, and it becomes a matter of tiring it out."

"Water and ice attacks from a cat, of all things..." Ran mused. She reached behind her and gave Chen's head a playful pat. "Have you been holding out on us, Chen?"

"I hate water," Chen growled cutely, pouting. "You know that, Ran-sama."

Before Ran could tell her that she was just teasing her a little, a battle cry from Creampuff directed their attention back to the duel. A ring of green projectiles-danmaku, probably-had begun encircling the Pokémon; once they were fully formed, Creampuff launched them at Blastoise's head and upper body. The bullets exploded on impact, making Blastoise stumble backwards several steps as it took the first real damage of the fight (the Copycatted Hydro Pump notwithstanding).

To Creampuff's disappointment, it wasn't enough to make Blastoise fall. The turtle remained upright, that ever-present smirk still in place. It spoke again, and to the human(oid) observers it sounded like nothing more than bits and pieces of the same word.

As it did prior to the fight, the language barrier was visibly annoying Reimu. "Chen, do you understand it by some chance?"

"No. I don't speak 'turtle'."

/- **Blastoise was asking me if I had anything harder to hit him with,** -/ Creampuff growled, teeth bared. /- **I do, but without my trainer here it has little to no power.** /-

Chen's ears pricked up. "Trainer?" she asked curiously.

/- **Yes.** -/

"Someone owns this cat?" Reimu wanted to know.

/- **No,** -/ Creampuff hissed. /- **Not 'own'. No one owns me. My human and I are partners on a never-ending quest to become as strong as we can be, to surpass everyone else and stand at the top of the heap. We travel and compete, battling against or assisting others of our kind, like Blastoise here.** -/

Chen provided the translation to Ran and Reimu; the latter of the two calmed down some. "Blastoise, huh? So that's what it is called... is it safe to assume that it's working with a human, too?"

Blastoise spoke again, resulting in another Creampuff-to-Chen translation. **/-He says, quote, "My trainer was an ignorant fool. I couldn't work with him before, and I don't work with humans now", unquote.** -/

"..." Reimu was silent, trying to determine the meaning behind those words.

/- **Chen, I have a favor to ask of you. From one cat to another.** -/

"...A favor?"

/- **My trainer is not here, and I don't know if I will ever see her again. I beg of you: please help me to become stronger in her stead. Command me, and help me to attain victory!** -/

"...!" Chen's speech patterns momentarily abandoned her. "Wha wha wha *what?!* How... wha... but... wha... *how?!* I... I don't know what you call those things you were doing, those pretty looking attacks!" she protested. "I used to be a housecat myself; I'm good at ignoring orders, not giving them!"

Ran had a hand over her mouth, but that wasn't enough to suppress her amused chuckles. "I'd say give it a go, Chen. You've got nothing to lose by trying."

The nekomata turned to her, still in a state of surprise. "But... Ran-sama...!"

"Look at it this way," said Ran, smiling encouragingly. "You get to have that cat shikigami that you always wanted."

For a few moments Chen thought back to the time when she tried to gather a group of cats together under her leadership, something which was ultimately unsuccessful. Unless you knew how to work with them, cats were notorious for disregarding suggestions and commands; they weren't miniature dogs that could be trained on a whim. "But..."

" *Blaaasssss*- toise."

Chen's ears flattened, and the fur on her twin tails fluffed up. There was something in the turtle's voice that she just *knew* was taunting her. "What... did it say?" she asked, her voice carrying just enough venom to make Reimu wary of her.

Her feline friend provided the translation, his own ears horizontal. /- **Creeaaaaampuff.** -/

The noise that Chen made in reply was a half-yowl, half-screech that made Creampuff's spine arch reflexively. Ran and Reimu both recognized it for what it was: the nekomata was *furious.* It took a few moments before she was able to keep her words calm. "Fine. I will work with you if you'll have me. Just... be patient with me."

The smile on Creampuff's face was beyond words. /- **Glad to have you, partner. Let's be quick about it; this is going to happen awful fast.** -/

"This won't take long," Chen growled, although a smile too was in the midst of forming. She stepped out from behind Ran. "Ice 'em."

Understanding the intention, Creampuff let fly with another icy blast. Blastoise had more than enough prep time to counter this attack, its body shimmering behind the translucent shield that it raised. The beam struck the shield and bounced off, heading straight back to its sender...

"Creampuff, watch out!"

The Delcatty jumped away at an angle, dodging its own attack and leaving it to freeze over a meter-wide patch of grass. Reimu fumed silently at this, knowing that somehow *she'd* be the one responsible for cleanup work, but the battle continued regardless of her feelings.

Blastoise got down on all fours, positioning itself as if it were getting ready to run a race. /- **Chen?** -/ Creampuff called. /- **That attack I mentioned? It should go a long ways towards beating him, but I'll need your OK to do it!** -/

"You'd better talk to me about this later, okay? Go for it!"

/- **That's all I needed to hear!** -/

Creampuff took off full tilt at Blastoise, shining yellow like the sun. Its newfound loyalty towards Chen resonated through every cell, filling it with strength. At this moment the turtle Pokémon *launched* itself

forward, startling the onlookers, and practically flew towards Creampuff head-on-

BOOM.

Blastoise's Skull Bash greeted Creampuff's Return explosively, exchanging high-fives with it and trying to bypass it to get at the buffet; the air was displaced at the impact point from the force. For all that Blastoise was larger and stronger than the cat, though, the strength of their attacks was equal; neither of them made any headway in finishing what they started. Creampuff jumped away sideways after the Return wore off; he landed with his back to Chen and waited for the catlike person to issue another order...

And only then did he realize that the collision had broken the ice around Blastoise's cannon. His ears drooped and his eyes widened. ***/-Aw, crud-/***

Nothing further was said. A titanic volume of water billowed forth from Blastoise's cannons, slamming into the distressed Creampuff and bodily throwing it backwards... straight at a panicking Chen. Pokémon and nekomata gave way to the aquatic force, getting washed against the trees that bordered the shrine grounds; Ran had taken to the air to avoid becoming an accidental target.

The flow of water stopped, and the turtle Pokémon stared disappointedly at the drenched duo. " *Blaaasssss*- toise," it grumbled again, turning and trudging off to rejoin Reimu on the porch.

/- **Owww,** -/ Creampuff groaned, its will to fight on completely sapped. It slid down the tree it had been embedded in, slumping onto the ground. /- **Chen, are you okay?** -/

Chen's shikigami connection with Ran had been broken via exposure to water, and she was a bit loopy anyhow; as such, a dazed "Meowwww" was the only reply he received.

"Oh dear, oh dear..." A worried Ran flew down to collect Chen's bedraggled form, paused a moment, then picked up Creampuff as well. "Reimu, I have to go and get her wits back in line. Talk to you more about this later?"

Reimu waved them off, preoccupied with her thoughts. Without another word, Ran departed the shrine grounds towards home.

In all honesty, Reimu was impressed with what she'd seen them do. It wasn't true danmaku, as the cat's bullets had been limited in number and could easily be evaded by anyone with half a mind. Still, the attacks were interesting. Blastoise's shield could be compared to what Reimu had seen Youmu do with her swords on several occasions, and Creampuff's freezing beam was a level up from most of Cirno's abilities (although according to Marisa, she'd been stepping up her game in recent years).

On the negative side, the attacks could still do physical harm if used improperly; that final attack of the turtle's showed as much, as did what Remilia had told her about the fiery rooster. She guessed that wherever these creatures were from, they needed to have trained doctors available to treat any wounded. If they really did have competitions like Creampuff said they did, it was the only thing that made sense from her point of view. The problem with this is that in Gensokyo, there wouldn't be anyone that knew how to treat these creatures or would want to (except Eirin, maybe), assuming that they were mistaken for unusual breeds of youkai.

Speaking of which, she didn't know what they were called as a collective, if they weren't youkai. She'd have to check into that when she felt like it. Yeah.

Reimu watched as the ice on the grass melted under the sunlight. *They showed me how things worked in their realm, and that's fine. But if they're going to be living here, their battle styles will have to change. We'll have to teach them how things work in Gensokyo, and see if they're game enough to adjust.*

She looked to her left when her shoulder was nudged. Blastoise sat there, offering her the empty cup that it had been drinking out of. Offering it to her, or... "Maybe I ought to teach *you* how to make tea," Reimu complained, but accepted the cup and walked off to check how much she had left.

-GAP-

Most of the day passed by quickly. Yukari could swear that she had spent most of an *hour* just trying to wipe her face clean; fox Pokémon were just as susceptible to enthused greetings as the average canine, it seemed. *Ah, well... nice to know that it evolved.*

To pass the time while they waited for Kevin's wife, Harmony, to return home, the homeowner gave her a whole slew of updates on what had taken place in Hoenn over the years. Leadership of the gym at Lavaridge had passed on to the newest generation. Technology had moved on ahead, surpassing what Yukari had seen of the Outside in some areas. The region's legendary monsters, Kyogre and Groudon, had been briefly awakened in the far east of Hoenn...

It was this last one that interested Yukari the most, and she conversed with Kevin at length on the subject. He didn't know much overall about it beyond the news reports that trickled into town, and the anecdotes of travellers from Mossdeep City and small towns who had seen the effects of their short battle. In the end it had been a group of courageous children and a visiting Elite Four member who calmed the Legendaries down, but the methods used and how they acted weren't part of Kevin's story.

During her first time in Hoenn, Yukari had read stories about great beasts that had altered the geography of the islands: Groudon, master of the land, and Kyogre, herald of the sea. Impressive and mighty, they were said to be, with powers and strength that-from what she could discern-were equatable to high-tier youkai...

Yukari's thoughts brought what was spoken of that foreign Elite Four trainer to her mind. *I didn't need the proof, necessarily, but that shows that there are other lands out there aside from Hoenn. It is likely that those lands have their share of legends as well, and the Pokémon that have their roles to play. It is best that I start by doing my research on them. .. and who knows? Maybe this expedition won't take as long as I had feared.*

And it had better not... I don't want to succumb to my winter hibernation while these animals are overrunning Gensokyo. Reimu would never let me hear the end of it.

-GAP-

Harmony returned home some time later. Traces of a bright and cheerful personality were still evident, and while her ponytailed hair was gray, her face did not show the same signs of age. Yukari suspected that if she wanted to, all she'd need to do was dye her hair black and she'd have young men falling over themselves trying to impress her. That had, in fact, happened when Harmony was still reasonably young; out of all of them, she'd chosen the only one who could defeat her Sceptile in a Pokémon battle. She was still married to that man today.

To Yukari's relief, Harmony's reaction to her return was a bit more subdued than those of Ninetales and Kevin: she just gave her a beaming grin and left it at that. Despite just having returned from her job, she immediately went to work on providing a full-course meal for her guest and her husband. That gave Yukari enough time to organize her thoughts and determine how she wanted to phrase her explanation for her visit.

It was towards the end of dinner that she dropped the metaphorical bombshell on the couple.

-GAP-

"...Are you serious?"

"Very much so, Kevin."

"...That's hard to swallow, Yukari dear..."

"I should've offered it to you in smaller chunks then, Harmony."

Harmony's hands trembled as she tried to maintain her calm. "You're... not human?"

"I said as much, yes... this curry is excellent, by the way." Yukari cleared her throat. "And before you ask, I'm not a by-product of a ghost Pokémon's illusion, either. I can understand if you don't believe me..."

"Yukari, explain. *Now."*

The tone and expression from Harmony was so much like Reimu's that Yukari plucked her fan out from within her blouse's left sleeve, opening it before her mouth to hide her amusement. "What I am, dear, is a youkai."

"You...kai?" Kevin's eyebrow raised. "What are they supposed to be?"

Either they have simply not heard of youkai, or there are none that exist in this world. Perhaps its my pride telling me this, but I'm assuming the former. Yukari crossed her legs as she spoke, careful not to bother the Ninetales that still nestled near her. "The long and the short of it is that the majority of us are fantastic or unrealistic creatures that, for varying reasons, have humanoid forms." *And discovering our primary food source would make you hate me forever, but you don't need to know that.* "Usually the eye color would've given me away, but apparently they're in all colors of the rainbow around here."

"True," Kevin confirmed. "Lavaridge's gym leader has *red* eyes. It's not an unusual thing."

"Anyway..." Yukari's fan wasn't large enough to hide her yawn. "Excuse me... along those lines, how familiar are you with the concept of magic?"

The couple actually bristled at this, faces becoming stern. "It's not an *unfamiliar* concept, but we still don't like it," Harmony admitted. "We have a grandchild in Johto who claims to be a practicer of magic. She supposedly has the ability to change people into Pokémon, but we've never seen it for ourselves. Had we had our way, she would never have gotten involved in such a thing."

Good enough. "You just made it easier for me to explain, Harmony. Where I'm from, as technology progressed, belief in the unnatural started to fade in favor of the mundane. With the aid of a powerful young lady, I had a magnificent barrier erected to shelter those magic-based beings that still clung to life. This eastern wonderland, Gensokyo, a paradise that's dangerous for the unwary but beautiful for the fully prepared, I have guarded for over a century." *Granted that's only part of the truth, but it's not necessary to tell them the full story-*

"Wow," Kevin breathed. "And here I thought my mother-in-law was ancient."

Yukari pinched the bridge of her nose. "...Harmony, you're sitting over there. Could you kick him in the shins for me?"

Harmony didn't comply with her request, but shot Kevin a sour look. The man held up his hands defensively. "Hey, it's alright, it's alright. Just kidding."

"May I please continue?" Yukari sighed.

The couple settled down, allowing her to keep speaking. "Thank you. Anyway, the reason I came back here is because my homeland is in danger."

Harmony inhaled sharply, eyes widening.

Kevin frowned. "What kind of danger?"

"Pokémon, as you're aware, are more than just living beings over here: humanity's lives revolve around them. However, back home outside the barrier, they're little more than a franchise. Anime, video games, plush toys and T-shirts... they have never existed on Earth as flesh-and-blood creatures." Beat. "...Although I guess in a way, their lives still *do* revolve around them. Just... not in the way you're used to."

This revelation had to have been harder to stomach for them than the statement that Yukari wasn't human. A world where Pokémon didn't exist, where they were basically one collective cash cow? Impossible! "And what does this have to do with the supposed danger that your home is in?" Harmony asked, shelving her disbelief for the moment.

Yukari's eyes narrowed. "I woke up this morning, and there was a Delcatty sitting on my chest."

It took a few minutes for Kevin and Ninetales to stop laughing.

-GAP-

"Anyway, Harmony, I'm sure you can guess at the trouble. Pokémon are not supposed to exist back home; if more showed up, not only would it upset the status quo, it would make the lives of both us youkai and the resident humans very difficult... never mind what would happen if they began to appear outside the barrier. They just wouldn't be prepared for that sort of thing. And what if Pokémon as powerful as Kyogre or Groudon appeared there and went out of control? The damage to the environment and lives alike would not be worth the cost of keeping them there. If there's a way into Gensokyo, I need to find it. Find it, put any loose Pokémon back where they belong, and shut the door so that they can't get back in."

"Sounds like a difficult quest, if it's true... Is there anything we can do to help? I assume that's why you're here specifically."

"Actually, yes. Could you lend me Ninetales?"

"Ninetales? Why?"

"Because I- down, Ninetales, stop licking my arms! -Because my primary means of self-defense is non-existent here. If it comes down to power I could probably take something my size in a fight, but raw strength will do me little good if I face off against, say, a full-grown Tropius alone. If I have Ninetales backing me up- AGH! Ninetales, not the face, not the face!"

"Eh-hahahaha... I don't have any problems with it. She really likes you regardless... so, do you know where you want to begin looking?"

"Well, I know what *to look for, but not* where. *Are there any major libraries in Hoenn that I can do research at?"*

"Hmm... several, but the biggest one is in Rustboro City, where the Pokémon Trainer's School is located. I strongly suggest that you travel to Littleroot Town first and get yourself registered as a trainer, though."

"How come? Would it really be that much more difficult to get things done?"

"Not 'difficult', really, just less expensive. If you have a license, you get a basic discount for any goods and services you may require. And the man who handles the registration is a professor himself; he should be able to point you in the right direction if your search doesn't pan out."

"...Thank you. Thank you very much, Harmony. I won't forget thiMMPH! Paws off the mouth, please! I still need to breathe!"

"...I knew distance made the heart grow fonder, but..."

"Not funny, Kevin!"

And so the conversation went.

By the time dusk had descended upon the town, Yukari had more or less collapsed where she had sat. Quiet snores filled the room as she slept, and she gave no sign of reacting to anything. Ninetales had curled up near her, using her tails to keep the snoozing youkai warm. The scene was amusing enough that Harmony didn't want to disturb her by moving her to a futon.

Kevin had already gone to bed, leaving Harmony to regard Yukari silently. The conversation from earlier was still settling into her mind; she still had trouble believing that the physically younger woman was anything other than human. She had considered the possibility, however slim, that the woman had been lying about 'Gensokyo' and her status as a paranormal being.

After Yukari was able to settle Ninetales down, though, she was able to tell them about how she'd vanished the last time...

"There are some youkai, such as myself, that choose to hibernate for long periods of time according to the season. In my case, due to... personal *circumstances, winter is my time to snooze. And while I sleep, I dream...*

"In most cases, my dreams don't have any connection to each other. That winter fifteen years ago was unusual, for reasons I'm still not sure I can explain. I dreamed that I'd woken up inside the home of a happy couple, who doted on me, fed and sheltered me... me, a complete stranger. I dreamed of Pokémon, those wonderful creatures that lived everywhere I looked and tended more often than not to live in harmony with humanity... a far cry from the Gensokyo I knew at that time. I dreamed of a land whose beauty seemed to stretch for many miles, where even the populated areas flourished. ...I'm a bit ashamed to admit it, since I've always been fiercely proud

of my home, but I recall thinking that if it was a dream, I wished it would never end. You two had been my first genuine human friends in centuries, and for that I was grateful to you.

"I remember going on a trip later in the season to the hot springs at Lavaridge, where I encountered Vulpix. I'd startled it, and it shot me with a Will O Wisp out of reflex. My special ability, the manipulation of borders, normally would've allowed me to recover from such an injury extremely quickly. Since I couldn't access it, I needed to have my left shoulder and the side of my face treated for burns. Vulpix was very distressed at what it had done, and clung close to me in case I needed anything; it even went so far as to follow us back here, and it wouldn't let me out of its sight. It was touching, very much so, and I came to see it as a smart and dependable companion.

"The urge to awaken was too great, sadly. The two of you had been out working, while I was housebound trying to teach Vulpix the Energy Ball technique. Everything became a blur, and I could hear my servant quietly calling my name. Before I knew it, I was back in my bed in Gensokyo, sitting up and rubbing the sleep from my eyes. I'd thought of my experience as one long dream, and at first I didn't think anything of it... and then my servant asked me why my shoulder and face were such a mess. I got up and hurried to the nearest mirror, and I saw the halfway healed injuries from the Will O Wisp. The memories, everything I'd seen, heard and felt... all of them had been real.

"It was the first time since my best friend had died ages ago that I gave in to the urge to cry."

Kevin and Harmony had said nothing to that, letting Yukari think about the experiences she'd had in Hoenn. Ninetales had regarded the woman's melancholy expression at length, finally breaking it by reaching up and taking hold of the woman's hat with her teeth. The resulting chase was short and energetic, and it had gotten some

chuckles out of the Laydens, but it had been enough to rouse Yukari out of her funk.

Now, looking down at her sleeping form, Harmony gave the matter some further thought. Certainly her claims of being a "youkai", a strange term at that, were hard to swallow like she had said. Yukari's statement that magic was part of life in Genokyo didn't sit well with her either. *However, aren't Pokémon in themselves magical in their own ways? Their strengths and weaknesses, what we've done for them, what they've done for us... this co-existence may not mean much in the grand scheme of things, but it's not to be looked down upon. And if it's powerful enough to affect the emotions of this inhuman woman...*

"...Mi...mi..."

One had to be paying attention to see it, but Yukari's eyes had opened a sliver. They didn't focus on anything at all, but one hand slowly reached up to pat Ninetales' head. "Mi...Midori..." she whispered, eyes closing again and signalling her safe return to Dreamland. Her hand slid back down to the floor as the snores resumed.

Harmony's smile was broad. Turning away, she left the room to begin her own preparations for sleep, feeling as happy as she did at the initial reunion. *Well, give me a coupon and declare a sale; I think I actually buy her explanation!*

Utilizing one's full power to open a portal across universes, then trekking for five hours on foot... Gensokyo's overseer could be forgiven for sleeping clear through breakfast and down through the rest of the morning.

Yukari woke up at noontime the next day, and found that the Laydens were out working at their respective jobs. They had been thoughtful enough to fill Harmony's old backpack with some supplies she'd need to make her trip, along with some spending money and

food for Ninetales and herself. Included in the supplies was Ninetales' Poké Ball, and a message: **"Do your best."**

She could not help but send a reply back to them, she knew. Quickly tracking down a sheet of paper and a pen, she spent the better part of ten minutes composing her reply. When Yukari left with Ninetales alongside her, the letter placed where the backpack had been, she felt as if her heart weighed just a little bit less.

"Dear Kevin and Harmony,

"By the time you read this, I'll be long gone. I all but told you that I was a monster in human form, but you still found it in your hearts to do all of this for me. I do not have many friends for reasons I can only describe as mean-spirited and calculating, so it feels wonderful to have experienced your kindness.

"I cannot promise that I will return. What I *can* promise is that I will do everything in my power to keep Gensokyo safe from harm. If I succeed in getting to the bottom of this mystery, I suspect it'll be all over the television networks soon enough. Still, I'll be sending periodic letters to keep you informed of my progress.

"It was an honor to have met you. Continue to live well and be healthy, and who knows? Our paths might very well cross again.

"All the best,

Yukari Yakumo

The Border of Phantasm

P.S. I have decided to call Ninetales 'Midori' from now on. The name makes sense in context, trust me."

During her lifetime, Remilia Scarlet was not one to let teams of hunters discourage her from being a borderline socialite. Through hook or by crook, she refused to let the stigma of her race or her weakness to sunlight keep her from dying of boredom; she liked to be *entertained.* Once a month, or once every two months at the most, she would sneak out and see if there was anything new in the world (this had the added effect of throwing prospective hunters far off her trail). This practice stopped after her home was transferred to Gensokyo; she couldn't see the sights if the sights were out of reach.

Using the Mansion as a base of operations over the centuries, she had seen history go by. When she was still very young, she had listened to a story about the Notre Dame cathedral's mysterious bell ringer. She had been present at several of Beethoven's performances, toured long-abandoned and forgotten castles, seen much of Europe during its good times and bad...

On one occasion during Napoleon's reign, Remilia had hidden herself in the background while a distinguished officer sang a song at a dinner party. The song had been catchy enough that even weeks later, long after she had returned home, she had caught herself singing it while walking about the Mansion's halls. She had counted herself fortunate that only the most trusted members of her staff at the time had heard her going on in that fashion.

What she hadn't counted on was that Flandre had overheard her singing as well, and the younger sister had found the tune very funny. Having little in the way of personal entertainment, she took whatever she heard to heart; butchering lyrics was fun in itself, after all.

And so it was about two centuries later that Flandre was engaged in one of her favorite pasttimes, dancing about the dungeon-turned-bedroom and singing whatever came to mind. A new toy had arrived in her room: a steel-covered bird as big as Sakuya, presently perched atop her canopy bed; she didn't know how it got there, but she suspected that Sakuya had snuck it in here with her time

manipulation trick. Secretly she dreaded the day when the toy would meet the fate of the many others she'd had before; it was rare when one of them would last more than a week, when she would inevitably forget her own colossal power and accidentally trigger her ability.

But for now she laughed, sang and danced.

(BGM: Danny Kaye - Gypsy Drinking Song)

"~Fluttering here and there and to and fro with too much bright energy, with a flap-flap-flap and a tap-tap-tap who seeks to upstage Remi, flies the sister! The sister! The siiii-iiii-yii-yii-yiister, the si-si-si-si-si-si-si-si-si-si-sister...!~"

Atop the canopy the bird watched her every movement, its features locked in a perpetual grimace. As she gave her performance, it slowly occurred to Flandre that the bird was not a toy, but a living being. With every lyric she recited, its disgust became increasingly evident.

And she did not like the fierce look it was giving her. Come on! She had two centuries to work on those lyrics! Her performance should've been flawless by now!

" *~...in her hands... there is nowhere to stand... and this is what they are sayiinngg... ...'Yum... yum...'~"* ...with a little whine at the end just to make herself sound cute.

The bird ruffled its metallic feathers, unimpressed. Flandre's anger burned, and she decided to bring a premature end to the song as only she knew how.

"~Sing, Flandre swing, Flandre fly, Flandre dance, Flandre leave, Flandre maul, Flandre eat, Flandre drink...~ " A menacing stare as an eye-shaped aura formed in her hand. " *~Flan-dre... drink to hellos and drink to good-byes, drink to the lows and drink to the highs...~* " Her expression softened. " *~Drink to this life so it all goes, and I will*

drink with my eyes...~" ...And then a sharp turn to the extremely deadly. ***"~...and so we drink!~"***

Her hand tightened around the eye-

Nothing. The room was dead silent.

Flandre glared first at the eye, then up at the bird. The steel toy stared back at her curiously, yet unflinchingly. "I *saiiiddd,* 'and so we drink'!" she shouted, squeezing her hand as tightly as she could-

But she was rewarded not with an explosion of atoms, but a sensation like that of unyielding iron against a human hand. She blinked, mouth open a centimeter in surprise. The oddity of something withstanding her ability was so unfamiliar that she paused, thinking this over...

"Skarrrr!"

An angry call caught Flandre's attention before she could ponder things for too long, and she met the bird's gaze eye to eye. She wondered for a second why it was mad. It wasn't that bright; it couldn't have figured out what she was doing, could it-?

The bird flapped its wings furiously, kicking up a fierce gust of wind. Flandre was lifted off her feet and thrown against the nearest wall with a *thunk* , grunting with the impact; the 'eye' she was holding disappeared. *Okay; maybe it* does *know.* She slid down to the floor, but quickly stood upright; the attack wouldn't have been enough to injure Meiling, let alone one of the Scarlet sisters-

A *whoosh* of air, and the bird had lifted off of the canopy and flown right into her face, hovering just a few inches away. Flandre smiled nervously, not sure what game she wanted to play. "But first we dance?" she offered tentatively.

The pecking order that was instituted immediately showed Flandre what her would-be plaything thought of that idea.

Crash!

Sakuya and Remilia looked up from the dining room table, the latter with a fork halfway to her mouth. The two looked at each other with puzzled expressions before the head maid decided to see what the matter was.

"Let me try that again..." a childish voice murmured from outside the room.

Before Sakuya could reach the door, one of the Mansion's fairy maids threw it open and entered. She frowned, recognizing this particular staffer: short brown hair, grass-green uniform, twig-like wings, a dandelion-shaped hair decoration behind her maid's headdress, and an intelligence quotient that made the rest of the staff look like geniuses; she also had a bruise on her forehead where she had collided with the door. Sighing, Sakuya asked: "How many times do we have to tell you? You open the door, *then* charge through it."

"It's okay, scary lady, it's okay," the fairy said, brushing that aside and beaming up at her. "Hey, did you know that the funny sister has a new pet bird?"

"What sort of nonsense are you going on about over there?" Remilia asked between bites. "We can't give Flandre any pets."

"Really? Hrmmm..." The fairy tapped her lip with a finger, thinking hard. Sakuya was getting ready to tell her that there was steam coming out of her ears when she finally spoke up: "Does the bird know about that? Someone should tell it."

A sigh from Remilia. "Sakuya, go and find out what she's talking about. D.F., attend to me."

Sakuya bowed. "As you wish, my lady," she said before freezing time and exiting the dining room.

D.F. tried to mimic the bow, but smacked her face against the edge of the door instead. "Ow! Hey, who put this wall here?" she complained. "That's not polite!"

Remilia silently regretted the day that she decided to round out the staff.

"SAKUYAAAA! BIG SISTER! SOMEBODY HELLLPPP!"

This was the yell that Sakuya heard as soon as she released her grip on time, standing before the dungeon/bedchamber door. Although she hid it well, it immediately made her nervous. *Even when the shrine maiden and the thief surpassed her in their respective duels, Flandre never became afraid. What is in there that would make her fearful enough to cry for assistance?*

Sakuya shook her head, gathering her courage. *For my lady. For the Scarlet family,* she told herself, undoing the magic locks on the door one by one. Passing through the door, she went down the staircase beyond and into the bedroom proper to see what was amiss...

For the second time in as many days, Sakuya witnessed a bizarre situation. Flandre was half-running, half-flying around the room, hands behind her head as she tried to protect it from her pursuer. Chasing her was a steel-armored avian, gleaming in the room's candlelight; between enraged caws, it would try to poke Flandre with its beak whenever it got close enough. Although it hadn't registered with either of the two that the pecking would not do her any serious harm, though...

Sakuya pinched the bridge of her nose. *First the martial arts rooster, and now a kite in sour armor.* "Birds... just *what* is your problem, birds?" she mumbled to no one in particular, drawing several knives from their sheathes. Shutting down time again, she carefully placed

the knives so that their trajectory would cut across the path between the pursuer and the pursued, then released her grip on chronology-

The bird halted itself the best it could, surprised, as the knives flew across its vision. Flandre was agreeable to this, taking this chance to dive beneath the bed. "Sakuyaaaaa!" she cried. "Where did you get that steely thing? It's so mean!"

"I had nothing to do with it." Sakuya retrieved her weapons, watching the bird all the while. It was staring at her, shrouded in an aura of indignance at having its chase interrupted. "Same with your sister. You know that we can't give you any pets, young mistress."

"But you had to have *something* to do with it!" Flandre insisted. "Animals don't just appear out of thin air! Especially ones that don't break!"

"...What."

"Huh? What is it, Sakuya?"

"...Could you run that by me again, young mistress? That last part you said?"

"Oh, right." Flandre's hand reached out from under the bed, a familiar eye in its palm. She tightened her hand as much as she could, and Sakuya reflexively braced herself... only for life to laugh and go about its business. "It won't break. The bird won't break-AHHH!" she shrieked, quickly dispersing the eye and retracting her hand when the bird tried to peck at it again.

"You shouldn't be trying to break living things, anyway," Sakuya said, keeping the surprise out of her voice. *Immune to the little sister's power? What manner of creature is this?* "Young mistress, do you think you can get it to chase you again?"

"What do you think it's *been* doing?" Flandre asked a trifle bitingly, her fangs visible.

"Do you have any objections to leading it towards the library?" Sakuya inquired, not letting herself be drawn into an argument. "This is the sort of thing that Lady Patchouli needs to know about."

"But I don't want it to peck my neck again!" the younger Scarlet complained. "Those kisses hurt!"

" *Please,* young mistress?" Sakuya inquired sweetly, a bit of the steel that formed her public persona entering her voice. "It won't hurt you if you stay ahead of it."

"... ...Oh, okay," Flandre reluctantly said, pouting. Cautiously keeping an eye on the bird, she crawled out from under the bed and tried to edge past-

"SKARRRR!"

And with a flap of its wings and Flandre's panicked yell, the chase was on again. This time, she had the mind to lead it out the room's open door.

By the time the two of them had left, Sakuya was already gone.

"...Another one."

"Indeed, Lady Patchouli."

"First the kickboxer. Then the 'ghost hat', as Marisa called it. And now..." Patchouli gestured at where the bird was chasing Flandre around the library's main reading area. "...this. What in Gensokyo is wrong with this place?"

"It looks super shiny," Koakuma commented, placing several fresh books onto Patchouli's desk. "Are you sure it's wearing armor, Sakuya? It appears too natural to be man-made."

"Correct." Another gesture from the librarian as the bird flapped its wings. "See, right there? Even the feathers are tempered steel. You can't get that sort of workmanship from the average blacksmith. I'm curious as to how its able to stay aloft in that state."

"Shouldn't we worry more about how it's irritating the young mistress?" Sakuya asked, keeping her anxiousness to stop the intruder from surfacing.

"Why Flandre-sama, though?" Koakuma turned to them, arms folded. She paid the chase no mind even when it passed within a meter of her. "What did she do to get it angry at her?"

Sakuya frowned. "I assume she tried to attack it. She said in her own way that the bird is immune to her ability."

Patchouli had been reaching for one of the books when she stopped in mid-motion. Koakuma's mouth fell open. The two of them looked at each other for four seconds, then slowly rotated to face Sakuya again. In one of those rare moments where two people are fully in sync, they both spoke to the maid the thought that was on their minds.

"What."

Cue the sweatdrop. "That's what *I* said."

"YAHHH! Back off! It's trying to kiss me againnnnn!"

" *SKARRRR!"*

The chase passed by about a meter away from Patchouli. Following Koakuma's lead, she ignored it. "In the past five centuries there has never arisen a material capable of surviving an experience with the younger sister. Only the most powerful magics can keep objects intact for casual day-to-day usage, lest we spend everything we have just replacing her wardrobe, and those spells are ineffective on

living beings. How in the name of everything in *existence* can this creature laugh off her strength? It makes *no* sense at all."

"Ya got me there, ze."

"There has to be some special quality embued in the metal-excuse me, the bird itself. Something must be keyed specifically to thwart attacks beyond a certain level of strength, or else it would be flat-out impossible to stop. Come, Koakuma. I will require your assistance in ascertaining the secret behind this phenomenon. Marisa, stick around; I need someone I can bounce ideas off of. Sakuya, inform Remi that I must not be disturbed, then lock the doors and prepare to keep the bird away from Flandre."

"A-alright."

"Sure thing, Patchy."

"I shall tell her immediately, Lady Patchouli."

Everyone set off to carry out their tasks... then stopped. A bead of sweat rolled down Koakuma's temple. Patchouli, disbelieving, dropped the book she was holding. Sakuya's aura darkened a bit.

...And as one, the trio whirled around and yelled: **"MARISA! What in blazes are you doing here?!"**

Marisa sweatdropped, but grinned. Next to her, Mismagius was watching the armored bird apprehensively. "I came back here to drop off that potions book I borrowed, but it looks like you've got hairier problems on your hands. Need any shears, ze?"

"...You're returning a borrowed book," Patchouli intoned.

"Well, yeah. That book was what got me merged with the ghost hat over here, remember? I got what I wanted out of it, so I don't need it anymore." Marisa gestured at said 'ghost hat', then folded her arms. "Meiling was nice enough to let me in through the main entrance."

"...You actually entered through the front door," Sakuya said with quiet surprise.

"Yep."

"...And you volunteered to help us with our problems," Koakuma murmured, awed.

"Yeah. So?"

Patchouli was silent for a few moments before turning to her assistant. "If anything should happen to me in the next ten minutes, Koakuma, you will find my copy of *Gone With the Wind* hidden behind my bed."

"And I shall see to it that Meiling inherits my cutlery," Sakuya added in all seriousness.

"I love everyone," Koakuma whined, teary-eyed. "I denounce every prank I ever played in my life!"

Marisa scratched the back of her head, looking put off. "Hey, now..."

Flandre had lost track of time while the chase was in session. All of her efforts to dodge the angry metal kite had proven useless up to now; the thing was as fast as she was, and any attempts to evade it through flight were ended by one of its wide-area whirlwinds. She had considered using danmaku and Spell Cards, but aside from her not knowing if *those* would effect it, she hadn't forgotten the last time she used Laevatein in the library. The nightmares she'd gotten from witnessing Patchouli's fury had lasted for a week.

Something zoomed past her, then turned in her direction. Flandre's face brightened. *Marisa! Sakuya!*

A hatlike being flew in towards the bird from the side, fiercely tapped it with its shadowy aura, then shot straight upwards. The tap was too

weak to harm the bird, but the suddenness of the attack made it flinch. When Flandre saw that her rescuers had Spell Cards in their hands, she hit the ground and stayed there.

"Star Sign: Meteonic Shower!"

"Lightspeed: C. Ricochet!"

"...Skar?"

The spell card system's signature magic circles materialized beneath the four of them. Marisa struck first, and the steely bird was peppered with a barrage of weak stars; some of them deliberately missed their mark, serving to keep the target caged in. The bird had no time to react and no way to see where Sakuya's favored weapons were bouncing around. Sure enough, once the Meteonic Shower wore off, the last of the thrown knives had bounced off a bookshelf and was zeroing in on its target... and once it hit, they *all* hit; purple streaks of light, each one a knife-shaped energy bullet, struck home one after another.

The shock of being hammered by so many attacks in such a short amount of time was too much for the poor thing's senses. Despite the magic circle having some power left and there being no way to suffer any actual harm, the creature's brain was telling it that there was no energy left to give. With a muffled crash, the bird dropped out of the air, hit the ground bellyfirst and remained still.

As Flandre sat up, Marisa turned to Sakuya. "Alright, raise one hand up."

"Huh?"

"Raise your hand up." Marisa demonstrated for her. "Like this."

"Anyyyy... particular reason why?"

Marisa gave her a weird look. "What, you've never been congratulated before? You need to get out more."

Sakuya smiled, ignoring Koakuma's approach. "Oh-ho? That's a funny thing for you to say."

"Yeah. Shouldn't you be directing that to Miss Patchouli?" Flandre chimed in. " *She's* the shut-in of the bunch."

"...Fine. I'll do it myself." Marisa raised her left hand into the air, then gleefully smacked it with the other. "Way to go, Marisa-chan! You rule! Ze-hahahahahaha!"

Sakuya wasn't quite sure what to make of her behavior, but she decided that it must not be terribly important. "Let's just get this thing back to the others, shall we? We've got work to do."

Marisa complied, cackling. With Koakuma's assistance, the downed bird was transferred back to Patchouli's desk via a wooden cart.

Flandre joined Sakuya as she followed them, wanting to cheer her up. "That's okay. I think you did a very fine job too."

"Thank you, young mistress, but I would ask you to change the subject if the tengu ever shows up and asks about any of this."

The younger Scarlet shrugged noncommitally and trotted off ahead, muttering about not having a Flandre song without a Flandre chorus. Sakuya rolled her eyes and sighed quietly, thankful that no one knew what the Mansion's residents were really like outside the public eye.

Remilia and her attendant fairy maid joined the group in the library a short time later, the former having just wrapped up her meal. D.F. kept herself occupied by being useless, gawking at the library's expanse, so Remilia waved her off and left her alone.

The intrusive bird, whom Mismagius had referred to as a "Skarmory"-whatever that meant-was seated on the cart next to Patchouli's desk, looking grumpy for good reason: a set of magical chains were keeping it tied down. Koakuma was examining it from every angle and taking notes, while Patchouli extracted what information she could through scrying.

"Appeared right out of nowhere, huh?" Marisa was saying to Flandre. "You'd think that it was one of Sakuya's parlor acts..."

"That's what I thought, too. But..."

"I hadn't been down to Flandre's room since her previous meal," Sakuya informed the magician. "And as we've said a few times by now, she's not allowed to keep any pets. You know why."

Skarmory squawked something indignantly. *Oh, don't be that way,* Mismagius cheerfully replied. *I'm sure they'll let you go if you're really nice about it.*

Marisa idly tapped her broom's handle a few times. "What did he say, ghost hat?"

He said that he's no one's pet. Mismagius waited until Skarmory finished reading them all the riot act before continuing. *He's saying that he'd been eating fruit from his favorite tree when he was grabbed and thrown into this bright and colorful tunnel, that he didn't ask for any of this, and that he's mad at Rainbow Wings for her sudden attack.*

Flandre stared at the ground, unwilling to meet Skarmory's glare.

"A bright and colorful tunnel... hey, didn't *you* end up in a tunnel like that?" Marisa asked of Mismagius.

Yeah, but I wasn't grabbed or anything like that. I was just curious about a hole in the wall, and there I went.

"...A Mismagius... a Skarmory... and of course that fire rooster from the other day," Remilia mused aloud. "I wonder what sort of connection they have..."

That's an easy one, Mismagius replied, smiling pleasantly. *They're both Pokémon. Same as me!*

Everyone's eyes save Patchouli's were fixed on the ghost. "Pokémon?" they asked at once.

Yep yep. Pokémon , *pocket monsters, whatever you want to call us.*

"But you don't look like a monster," Flandre said, puzzled. "You look too cute for that."

Patchouli coughed something which might've been the words "pot", "kettle" and "black", but no one paid attention to her.

"Well, we have a name, at least." Koakuma wrote down the term for later research. "Now then, all of this still leaves the question of what we're going to do about Skarmory. That takes first priority, I think."

Skarmory rattled off some words for Mismagius to pass on to the others. *He says that so long as he's no one's pet and Rainbow Wings says she's sorry, do whatever. And he wants some spicy food, too.*

Amusement from Marisa. "'Rainbow Wings' would make an awesome nickname."

"I should say *not* ," Remilia disagreed. "She needs to keep her reputation inta-... Flandre! *Flandre!* What are you... get off the floor!" she shouted, fists clenched at her sides. "Have some dignity, for Vlad's sake!"

Patchouli, having dismissed the scrying circles, drifted over and rested a hand on her shoulder. "Let it rest, Remi. Let it rest."

"Rrrr... Patchy, look at this! What is she doing?"

Patchouli closed her eyes, smiling. "Growing up."

Flandre was on her knees before Skarmory, hands on the floor and her head bowed. "I know you said you're no pet, but I've always wanted to play with something that wouldn't break. I've been locked up for centuries because of my lack of restraint. I understand why, and it's for my own good, but just once I'd like to spend the day with someone who isn't scared of my strength! Please, Skarmory, don't hold my anger against me! Forgive this humble child!"

No one moved. Remilia was torn between berating her sister and hoping for the best outcome. Sakuya and Koakuma waited with baited breath. Marisa whistled, impressed; Mismagius stayed quiet, not understanding the repercussions of Flandre's actions. Patchouli still smiled, likely knowing the outcome already. In the background, D.F. tried to count all the books she could see but lost track at seven.

Finally, Skarmory relaxed a bit and spoke. Mismagius obligingly translated: *Um, spicy food? Anytime now?*

"YEAHHHH!" Marisa pumped a fist and yelled, making Koakuma jump.

The younger Scarlet did not hesitate; she bolted from the floor and grabbed Skarmory in a hug, which seemed to greatly embarrass the Pokémon. "I *like* it, I *like* it!"

While no one was looking her way, Sakuya sighed quietly and added another notch to the "incidents resolved" tally.

Remilia facepalmed, but even then the corners of her lips kept twitching. "Flandre, Flandre, Flandre... were those lessons on etiquette and decorum for nothing?"

A low chuckle. "Friendship trumps pride," Patchouli said, dissolving the chains that kept Skarmory secured. "Maybe you'll have a better hand next time."

"The way things are going, there won't *be* a next time," Remilia complained. She straightened, stretching her arms. "What would you know about friendship beating pride, anyway?"

"Plenty. I'm friends with *you,* remember?"

Remilia slapped a hand over her heart, cried out as if she'd been staked, and slumped to the floor. Marisa snorted in amusement. "She's a total drama queen, isn't she?"

"You have *no* idea, monochrome."

Flandre's joyous laughter would resound throughout the library for quite some time. Following a celebratory feast she would attempt to finish her performance before an audience, but that is a story for another day. What was important was that the moment that Skarmory agreed to be friends with her was one of the happiest moments of her life. Even Remilia couldn't dispute that.

Blastoise's moveset: Hydro Pump, Withdraw, Skull Bash, Mirror Coat

Approximate Level: 41

Reimu's Notes: Marisa freeloads from time to time if she forgets to restock. Suika? Whenever she's not bothering the Celestials or visiting the oni underground, here she is. Now we have a fully-armed *turtle* in residence here at the shrine. Did I anger someone to have this done to me? Tell me honestly. I mean, it's not like it's helping me bring in donations or anything. So why am I willingly putting up with 'Blastoise', whatever that name means? Why am I thinking that letting it stay here would be a *good* thing? Is my intuition telling me something? This requires further thought.

Delcatty's moveset: Hidden Power, Copycat, Ice Beam, Return

Approximate Level: 38

Chen's Notes: Creampuff took his loss a lot better than I did. Feeling disconnected from Ran-sama is not nice. Still, life with him around is fun. I can tell he misses his trainer, or master, or whatever you want to call it, but he's making the best of the situation. I can't wait to show him to Mystia and the others! Just imagine the games we could play!

Skarmory's moveset: Whirlwind, Spikes, Steel Wing, Peck

Approximate Level: 33

Flandre's Notes: Remi let me have a pet bird! ...Wait, I can't call it a pet. Oops! Anyway, this is a dream come true! Patchy confirmed that it really *is* living armor. I don't understand all those fancy words she used, but I could figure out that it's why it can't be broken! It doesn't like being cooped up in here every hour, though, which I understand. I kinda wish I could follow it wherever it goes... curse my lack of self-control!

Alice, the Villagers

MONSTERS IN PARADISE

Chapter Four

By: Curtis Wildcat

Pokémon and the Touhou Project are the properties of their respective owners and copyright holders. Warning: creative liberties have been taken with one of the characters in this chapter. I've done what research I can on this character (thank goodness for the Touhou Wiki), and I've decided to... fill in the gaps, you could say. You were warned.

Also, another warning: not all Pokémon are benign or friendly with humans, and that means *someone's* going to be getting the short end of the stick.

I split up Chapter Four. There was a scene that contributed to the plot late in the chapter, but it gives the impression that it's an outtake of some kind *and* has next to nothing to do with the featured Pokémon; so, I gave it its own little niche in the listing.

Spot the *Cromartie High School* cameo in Chapter 4.5 and dish up some ice cream. It's not a hard one to find.

It had come quickly that evening as the sun was setting. The wind, the rain, the thunder and lightning: all the signs that a storm was striking a substantial section of Gensokyo. Most of the residents sequestered themselves indoors, except for those fairies and youkai that loved being out in this sort of weather. It was entirely unexpected; all the signs had pointed to clear and mild conditions, and any gossip amongst the youkai focused on the possible reasons for the change.

Whatever the cause of it was, it didn't bother Alice; her work went on no matter what the weather was. People knew her as a dollmaker and puppeteer, occupations that went hand-in-hand. For now, she was neither: instead she was a researcher, determining and testing the means for which her creations would be able to increase in size.

"...The ice fairy had been able to surpass the Titania Dolls, to say nothing of the Goliath Doll," Alice murmured to herself as she took notes. "...So not only are they inadequate against small, agile targets, intimidation and strength probably wouldn't be enough against any youkai intelligent enough to craft a Spell Card." She shuddered. "And if I used them against Marisa..."

If I used them against Marisa, the Forest would be littered with debris faster than I could blink. ***Why*** *did she have to steal that attack from Yuuka?*

"...Perhaps it would be best if I reserved them for opponents larger than me," she continued, deciding to wrap things up for now. "And there's still the issue of keeping the Goliath Doll intact for longer than a minute of use... a more stable source of magic is required. I'd rather not be housebound again just because it self-destructed next to me..."

That *had been embarrassing. Just as well that no one was around to see it; the fairy flew off as soon as the Goliath Doll exploded. Because of the blazing backlash I was stuck indoors for two days to recover, and my dress was a complete waste... thankfully, I have seven identical outfits in my closet for such a situation. If I learned anything from that fiasco, it's that I need to fireproof anything that needs it.*

Alice set her notes aside, got up and looked about her house, checking on her collection. Satisfied that nothing was out of place, she sat down in the front room with the latest copy of the Bunbunmaru newspaper and flicked it open. *May as well see what the tengu has been up to,* she thought, smiling a little. *Mocking the*

half-truths in her reports is often good for a laugh... She blinked as a headline caught her eye. *...Hm? Wonder what this is...*

"New Types of Youkai Sighted! Friends, Foes, or Et Cetera?"

Reimu, Marisa, the shikigami's shikigami, the Scarlet Devil Mansion's gatekeeper, and the moon rabbit have all been sighted in the company of assorted creatures. They are strange, and yet in some cases strangely familiar... the blue turtle brings to mind the old lizard that was ferrying Reimu to Makai when we first met. No one knows where they came from, and the only conjecture anyone has to offer is that they may possibly have come from another world altogether... but there is no true proof of this beyond their unfamiliarity with the Spell Card system. All but the youngest of those seen have their fighting abilities sharply honed, and their attacks bear only a passing resemblance to true danmaku.

Alice shook her head, smiling bitterly. *This must be why Marisa hasn't dropped in for some time: the new arrivals have gotten everyone worked up, trying to discover what they can about them. I don't care that she hasn't visited- - -I'd forgotten what it was like to have true peace and quiet- - -but she could've gotten the news to me ahead of the tengu.*

The *boom* of thunder that followed her thoughts reminded her that it was storming outside. *It's too late to go anywhere now, and navigating through the storm would be more trouble than it would be worth.* Yawning, she pushed the newspaper aside and stretched a little. *Time to call it a night.*

As she went about her preparations for sleep, Alice thought she detected a dark aura brushing against her house's defensive magic. She closed her eyes for a few moments and focused, but the sensation didn't repeat itself. *Might have been the darkness youkai. The storm would make the perfect cover for someone like Rumia to*

catch her prey, whether she's successful or not. ...Of course, typically not.

"Now how did that little tune go again..." Alice 'hmm'ed to herself. *"~Shadow, shadow you idiot, watch out for that tree...~"* A soft chuckle. "...Or words to that effect... ah, that was a classic act. Maybe I could use it again during my next performance at the village... I was told that it was fairly popular amongst the children..."

Her eyes drifted to Shanghai, sitting peacefully on a shelf near her bed. "And here I go talking to myself again... maybe I ought to get out more. What do *you* think?"

Shanghai didn't respond, which was to be expected. Alice, however, sweatdropped as if the doll had actually spoken. "What do you mean, 'mad as a hatter'? Is that some sort of joke?"

Again with the silence.

"No, I'm not going to any tea parties anytime soon," Alice answered, her voice heated. "I've been very busy recently. Now if you're finished teasing me, I'd like to go to sleep now..."

Alice had been facing away from the window, so she didn't see the shining blue eyes that had been looking through it at her. Her danger sense suddenly flared, and she whirled around... right as a field of blackness surrounded her.

The void descended, with Shanghai as its only witness. Naturally, she was speechless.

At the back of her mind, Alice knew she had been attacked. Some small part of her- - -possibly a white blood cell- - -tried to keep this thought in mind, to wake her up to the reality that all was not well in the city of Margatroid. Her dreams squashed that outspoken voice, subjecting it to so much strangeness that it finally threw its hands in the air and stated that they were all weirdoes.

The ridiculousness of it all unnerved her. There Alice was in a field, taking part in a game of some kind. But she, along with everyone else on the field and in the audience, was staring in shock as Marisa prepped her Master Spark. Did she not realize that it was not needed for her to win, or did she just not care? Just what in Gensokyo was going on here?

Marisa's mini-hakkero released its power, striking not only its target but also Alice and several hapless kedama, blasting them away. The flash of light had made Alice squeeze her eyes shut, so she didn't see where the target went. But over the Spark's roar, she could hear Rinnousuke shout a single word:

"GOALLLLLL!"

Light became dark.

It entered the room through a puddle of darkness, desperate for escape. It was unnerved, seeking sustenance and a way to fight back... against what, it knew not. It had been violently transported to a land it did not recognize as its home, where the order of things was so... different.

It did not want any of this. It did not want someone to bring out its strengths, for it was already strong. It wanted to eat, to go home, to live in safety away from humans who would use its power for their own objectives. That was all.

Darkrai hovered over Alice's unconscious form, feasting on the immaterial energy that only a person's nightmares could provide.

It really should have been more aware of its surroundings.

A steel titan, painted blue and patterned with flames, raised its foot over the building. Drums were beaten, and guitars were strummed.

"No! No, wait, not my house- - -!"

Ignoring her cry, the titan stomped down on the house. Repeatedly. This was closely followed by repeated pummeling from a pair of metallic fists, and a high-intensity volley of energy beams. Almost unheard over the ruckus, someone cackled with glee.

Rooted to the ground and filled with despair, Alice missed the "DMV" sign- - -"Department of Magical Vehicles"- - -that was blown at her.

Shanghai didn't move, didn't visibly react to the threat... all the better to keep herself unknown to the enemy. It was impossible to tell with this doll what her nature was; when she wasn't being controlled by Alice, she never seemed to do anything.

But she had eyes. All the dolls had eyes, and they had ears. They were imbued with a spot of magic that made it easier for them to be manipulated, to be used for any purpose their controller deemed necessary... including surveillance. Because of this, nothing in the house escaped their notice. And what one saw, same with the rest.

Alice loved them, took good care of them all, and sought a way to give them true life. What she didn't know was that in their own way, they already *were* alive. Not in the sense that they could truly think or feel, but in the sense that their loyalty to their creator knew no limits. That was the seed, and one day it would sprout into something much greater... but for now, this would do.

They knew right away that their master, their mother, was in danger. They saw. They heard.

And they *responded.*

"Alice? Alice dear? Please wake up."

...Shinki? ...I'm back home...? Dear sweet mother of Makai, I've been gone too long...

"Alice?"

"I'm awake, I'm awake..."

Or so she said, but her eyelids felt really heavy. She strained to open them, grimacing.

"It's been a long time, Alice. My, you've certainly grown, and not just in appearance."

The smudges before her eyes slowly solidified; she recognized Shinki's general shape and appearance, blurry as they were. Alice hung her head, feeling disappointed in herself. "I've never succeeded, mother. In catching up to them..."

"I take it that's why you left in such a hurry?" Shinki sounded amused. "I had wondered where you had gone..."

"The four of them struck like lightning. I remember they hadn't taken your "tourism" idea well..."

"Well, yes. I suppose I should've asked first."

Alice stared down at the floor. "I wanted to get back at them in some way, so I unlocked the grimoire... but by the time I had expended all the energy it was willing to give me, they still stood triumphant." Her vision clouded up again. "I thought you would be angry with me for going so far, and I had difficulty living with myself for my failure... so I fled, keeping myself hidden from Reimu and the others when they returned to Gensokyo. I didn't feel I could face you again without feeling ashamed..."

Shinki sighed. "My little daughter, where did you get such ideas into your head? Why did you think that I would be upset with you for seeking to restore my honor? I might doubt your actions, but never

your motivation." She knelt and took Alice into her arms. "No matter what you think, you will always have a place here. That has not changed, and it never will."

Alice never felt so thankful towards her mother figure in her entire life. She was willing to forgive her actions? To take her back into Makai, if she allowed it? She thought about what it would be worth, living under her wings again...

"And aside from that, you look kinda cute when you're cryin'."

Her eyes widened. That wasn't Shinki!

"...What? Did I say something wrong?"

Alice yanked herself free and scooted away, her vision clearing up fully, and for the first time she got a discernible look at the woman's face. The puppeteer was right: she might have been dressed like her, but this person wasn't Shinki. Her face reddened out of mortification and anger. ***"MARISA!*** What are you doing here?!"

Marisa grinned and tipped her hat. "Usurping your dream, Alice. What did you *think* I was doing?"

" ***ARRRRRGGGHHHHHHHHH!"***

They had no auras for Darkrai to sense, no energies that it recognized. For all it knew, they shouldn't have been able to live, never mind flying. And yet they did.

The door to Alice's room slammed open, and a blistering barrage of danmaku billowed forth. Caught by surprise, there was no way for Darkrai to dodge them all; while some of the bullets kept it hemmed in, the rest struck home and exploded, smacking it into the wall. Each bullet had been weak individually, but together they distracted the Pokémon enough for it to reflexively dispel the Dark Void.

A dozen dolls in assorted dresses and costumes, armed with weapons ranging from lances to bows and arrows, flew into the room and formed a screen around and above their master. A tiny bit of smoke, which vanished as their hands stopped glowing, proved that they had been responsible for the bullet wave.

The sight of twelve faces locked in a permanent, unyielding stare would've unnerved the average human, but Darkrai wasn't bothered. Floating away from the wall, it darted around and made a variety of sharp turns so fast that it resembled little more than a black blur. The dolls' faces turned left and right, trying to keep track of it. It was to no avail as Darkrai flew in from their blind side, intending to sweep them away with a single Faint Attack...

Three fingers twitched.

A red energy shield, a triangle positioned in the center, manifested directly in Darkrai's path. Committed to its attack as it was, it was unable to change course; it struck the shield at full speed and rebounded off, flipping end over end and *smashing* into the magically-reinforced wall. The shield disappeared immediately thereafter.

"... ..."

Alice slowly stood, not saying a word as Darkrai freed itself from the wall again. Her body quivered with silent rage as she got her breathing under control. Her eyes, which had been blue before, had turned an eerie yellow. She pivoted a fraction, meeting Darkrai face to face. It was only when a Spell Card materialized in her left hand did she finally speak.

"I do not know who or what you are. Really, I can't bring myself to care. I never bothered you or otherwise antagonized you in any way, shape or form. And yet here you are, not only intruding on my home territory but striking when my guard was down. Normally I would not forgive you for your offenses, especially in light of your unwarranted attack on my subconscious. However, the hour is late and I am tired;

I would like little more than to regain my strength without your interference. So I will give you the chance to leave this place. I suggest you take it and go, or else you will learn what it means to anger a youkai."

Darkrai was not intimidated by her words, or by the malevolent aura she was emitting (which, unbeknownst to the Pokémon, had caused every fairy within a one kilometer radius to pass out from an unexplained fear). It knew that it was capable of dealing with far worse than the dolls were churning out, and if pushed could come out on top in a fight. Yet it remained still, trying to determine whether it should stick around to do so or retreat. There was plenty of easier prey that it could find, and it did need to siphon energy *somewhere* if it was to live.

It didn't want to be here. If only it knew how it had gotten here... then it could've been able to do something about it! But no; here it was, stuck in a strange land where even inanimate objects could fight back. This was not what it bargained for. No, it would not stay here and garner any more of this odd girl's wrath.

There will be... another time.

Coldly furious, Darkrai sunk into the floor and disappeared; several dolls started to drift towards the door to find it, still operating on the instinctive command that made them attack the intruder to start with, but a motion from Alice's fingers made them remain. Less than half a minute later, a flash of lightning illuminated its shady form through the window as it fled deeper into the Forest.

Alice waited a while after her assailant passed beyond the range of her senses before doing anything. She wanted to make sure that it would *not* be returning, and it allowed her to ensure that her mental faculties were still at full strength.

Had this youkai, or whatever it was, just chosen poorly while out on the hunt? ...No. It was new to her personal territory to be sure, but

she could both see the intelligence in its eyes and sense its power. Such a stupid mistake should never have been considered...

Unless it's one of those new breeds that the newspaper was talking about, and it is unfamiliar with Gensokyo's own little rogues gallery. The average resident is not one to be underestimated, and if it was locked into a Spell Card duel without any Cards *against someone of Keine's level or higher, victory would not come easy. The moon people especially would have a field day with this one.*

Her eyes returned to their normal blue color, and she dispelled her Spell Card. *Still, I have the feeling that I'm missing something important... something terribly, terribly important- - -...*

"Nghh!"

The muscles in her legs gave way. Alice fell on her knees, struggled back upright but then collapsed back-first against the side of her bed, the rush of adrenalin from her anger dissipating. "...It was draining my energy while I was asleep... of *course* I'm going to feel fatigued," she grumbled. She looked up at the squad of dolls that were floating nearby, now that she'd managed to get some strings connected to them, and smiled. "I wish I could make it up to you somehow... you might have just saved my life a minute ago."

Her pleased look shifted into confusion as she turned to stare at Shanghai, and from there into a sort-of panic. "What... wait... you said 'Dogpile on the dollmaker'?! What does that- - -AAH!"

The collection of dolls dropped their weapons on the floor and dived at Alice, pressing her into the side of the bed. Her feigned fear gave way to merriment. "So, *that's* how you want to play?" Struggling a bit, she was able to loosen one of the dolls' grip on her, only to immediately return the embrace she'd just experienced. "The youkai of hugs has invaded! Counterattack, my little legion!" she ordered, sure of the knowledge that this wouldn't be reaching the public's ears.

There was a time for anger and worry in every day, but she had already experienced those; now was a time for joy and amusement. She always regretted her loss to Reimu and the others at Makai, but her hobby, her creations, her *way of life* were jewels to be treasured. By the time she finally gave in to exhaustion, a dozen lifeless dolls all but smothering her under their weight, the surrealism of her prior nightmares had been forgotten...

And unseen by Alice, Shanghai's expression shifted into something contented for a few seconds before reverting back to its standard neutrality.

-GAP-

It had been two days since Yukari had left the Laydens behind. Two days of hours-long traveling, scenic views, bonding with Midori, and heavy sleeping. Her progress was slow and steady as she headed straight south, and she repeatedly cursed at whoever it was that had created that map of Hoenn. The region was a *lot* bigger than they had made it out to be; she'd expected to be at Mauville City by now. She would've just flown there, but she didn't want to divulge that ability to anyone who might be watching.

Following their mid-day meal yesterday, Yukari had tested Midori to see exactly where her strengths were. Her experience in battle didn't match her age, sadly, as the former Vulpix had no motivation to train herself at all while the overseer was gone. She doubted that it was due to any lack of effort on Kevin's part; the fox Pokémon just never felt comfortable taking orders from anyone else. She estimated that its level was in the upper 20s, which left plenty of room for improvement.

Since its training was incomplete, it still needed to learn the Energy Ball technique. One thing Yukari had learned during her first stay was that the rock-paper-scissors system was in full force here; if Midori was exposed to large amounts of water or intensive earth-related strikes, she would be in serious danger. She didn't know why

a technique that embodied nature could be taught to a fire breather, but if it worked out it would go a long way towards evening the odds.

Most Pokémon had enough brainpower to retain up to four techniques successfully. It was uncommon, although not rare, for a Pokémon to possess five or more; but most of the time, if they were taught an extra technique they risked forgetting one that they already knew. The exact criteria needed to unlock the "extra storage" had stymied researchers and professors for decades. Once Energy Ball was mastered, Yukari would have to choose which of Midori's attacks that she wanted to get rid of.

First, there was the high-intensity Heat Wave technique, roughly equal in strength to Flamethrower, if not stronger. It was Midori's most effective move, and the only one she had that did direct damage. No way was Yukari going to ditch that.

There was Roar. Yukari had heard Vulpix use this 'attack' once before, and it sounded more like a loud squeal (which somehow managed to scare away Pokémon of its size). It was possible that the pitch and tone had improved upon her evolution, but she had yet to judge for herself.

Third was Will O Wisp, the technique that Yukari had bad memories of. Being able to cause instant burns was nice, but the real question would be whether Midori would be willing to use it again in light of how much she regretted that incident.

Fourth and last was Double Team. Personally Yukari thought it was fitting for Midori to have that technique; unlike Ran and Chen, the Ninetales couldn't flummox a foe by flipping around the battlefield, so perhaps illusions would suffice. Time would tell if it could be used to its maximum effectiveness.

So much planning and so little time, Yukari thought as she walked. *I've gotten too used to having my powers at my beck and call. Tactics are my forte, and I'll need to rely on them heavily here. This will be good for me on some level, of that much I'm sure.*

That being said... Her face scrunched up in annoyance. *How much farther until I reach that blasted city? Walking around like this is too much work!*

"Hey. You're a trainer, right?"

Yukari paused to regard a rock off to her left. A dark-haired, lightly tanned teenage girl dressed for summer sat there, her clothes mostly purple and black; she had an odd scent that only someone with Yukari's enhanced senses could've detected. What was distinctive about her were the flame-patterned, fingerless gloves she wore and the red-white ribbon positioned in the center of her head.

A *very familiar* red-white ribbon.

The youkai shook her head and answered the girl. "I'm not registered, nor am I interested in a battle at this time."

The teenager smirked. "Good, because I'm not looking for one."

Yukari's 'Indignance' button wasn't that easy to push. "So... why ask me?"

A smirk no more. "I'm just wondering if you might've seen a Blaziken anywhere around here."

"No, I haven't."

The girl snarled something under her breath that couldn't have been polite. "Blast it... first one, and now another... what is *wrong* with this world all of a sudden?"

What is wrong with...? "Mind explaining to a tourist what you are talking about?" Yukari inquired, left eyebrow arched.

The girl grimaced, but nodded. "Got a call from a good friend in Rustboro three days ago, telling me that her Delcatty's gone missing. I dismissed it as just cats being cats... they have their habits and all

that. Then not one hour after I got the call, my partner Blaziken vanished while my back was turned."

"Vanished?"

"Yeah. We've been training together since I started my journey, and far as I know I've never done anything to offend him." The girl waved her hands about in frustration. "It's like... I dunno, like he disappeared by magic or something."

Yukari remained visibly neutral, but internally she was interested. *As if he were spirited away... hmmm... But is boundary manipulation the root cause of this, or is it something else? It can't possibly be this clear-cut.* "Now that's highly improbable. Who believes in magic in this day and age?"

"That's what I'm thinking, so I've been wandering this entire route looking for clues." The girl shrugged. "Haven't found anything yet, but I'm going to keep at it until my supplies start running low."

"On that note," Yukari asked, "just how far is it to Mauville City?"

"About six miles as the Murkrow flies," was the trainer's response, her eyes assessing everything there was to see. "Heh... you look like you have a soft and cushy job somewhere. Who are you?"

"Yukari Yakumo. And now you're just being rude."

"Eh ... Call me Zanthia. Or Zappy; everyone else does. Where are you headed?"

"Littleroot, then Rustboro. I heard that they have a good library."

"They do, at that... although the librarian's been looking like a zombie as of late."

"..."

Zanthia shrugged at Yukari's silence, mistaking it for disbelief. "You'll see for yourself when you get there. Anything else?"

Yukari smiled. "Remember, you're the one who started all this, not me. If you hadn't stopped me, I'd still be making good time on my trip."

"Yeah, listen to the parasol lady," an accented voice taunted from behind Zanthia, making her eyes dilate. "You'll be less confused that way... not like that's ever stopped you."

Zanthia somersaulted onto the path and whirled around to face the newcomer, who was standing just a foot away from the rock. Yukari inhaled sharply: the figure had red hair tipped with white, and had traveling clothes similar to her own, but her senses were screaming at her that she *knew* who this person was. There was no way her beauty could be anything *but* unearthly.

" ***You!*** Don't you dare sneak up on me like that!" Zanthia bit out, fury radiating off of her in waves. She obviously didn't care about how good-looking this person was. "Do you have no concept of personal space?!"

"Look, we know how this is going to end," the older woman said, yawning. "I taunt you, you make accusations, and we work each other up to a Pokémon battle. Let's eliminate the middleman and get down to business, alright, Zappy?"

"Gladly!" Zanthia grabbed a Poké Ball from her belt and triggered it, jettisoning a Hariyama. "You've got a lot to answer for, Serena!"

"Me and everyone else in the world." 'Serena' let out her own Pokémon, this one an obvious water-type but of a species that was unfamiliar to Yukari. "Everything with you is 'grudge grudge grudge grudge'. My ancestors and yours are dead, so just get over it already!"

Yukari noted that both of the Pokémon weren't terribly enthusiastic about battling when they saw who they were up against. She could easily picture them saying 'well, here we go again'. "Far be it from me to meddle in the affairs of strangers." She turned and walked away; knowing they couldn't see it, she grinned broadly. "Thanks for your help, Miss Zanthia."

"Yeah, whatever. Hariyama, Cross Chop!"

"Harrriiii..."

"Empoleon, Drill Peck!"

"Emmmp..."

"-YAMA!"

"-POLEON!"

As she left the combat behind, Yukari's mind was at work. Even without her dream a decade and a half prior, she had always been a firm believer in the concept of a multiverse and alternate dimensions. Many people in one world had their counterparts in another; she personally knew of at least one reality where she lost all ability to reason when faced with a defeat, and shunned her other self for it. Around the time Tenshi was acting up, she had a brief encounter with a "mirror image" of herself that possessed a different color scheme but fought the same way.

Zanthia didn't have all of the qualities, to be sure. She was a bit more talkative, took an active interest in what Yukari was up to, and showed elements of... well, being a jerk. But by connecting the dots, the youkai could tell that she had a close association with fire-types. There was her reaction when that other woman appeared, and the violent animosity that would've led to a brawl in any other era. Of course, there was also the ribbon.

And Yukari had finally determined what that strange scent was that had been lingering around Zanthia: the scent of agelessness, of something long-lasting. The same scent, she belatedly realized, that was on the woman she was battling.

Even across dimensions, lives and names, your eternal grudge lives on... Fujiwara no Mokou.

-GAP-

True to Zanthia's word, Mauville City was six miles away. This took Yukari close to three and a half hours to traverse, maintaining a slow pace and stopping to rest halfway there. By the time she reached the city limits, the sun had sunk to just above the horizon.

Upon entering she wandered around a bit, venturing into the brighter areas of the city and taking in the sights before proceeding to track down the Pokémon Center. *Give Midori a checkup, then sleep, sleep,* ***sleep.*** *There has to be a faster way to get this done!*

"Hey, lady. This part of town is the Violet Vigoroths' territory. Pay the fee, for it ain't free."

Preoccupied with her thoughts, Yukari ignored the leather-dressed carnival rejects and kept walking. *I never thought I'd regret the day that I openly mocked the first bicycles. If I knew that they were going to be this widespread, I would've bought one for myself and never used it.*

Footsteps pounded the ground behind her. "Lady! Are you listening?! Get back here!" "Linoone, Swalot, after her!"

Depending on the bicycle, I could look rather classy while riding one, but the terrain in Gensokyo would not allow it. Maybe I could buy one as a souvenir, learn the basics, and teach Chen how to ride it. Yukari's hand moved to the back of her head to scratch it; meeting resistance, she applied extra strength in return to deal with that

annoying itch. *I could ask the kappa to modify it, make it strong enough to run over an oni in the middle of the road...*

"Linoone! No! How did she- - -?!" "Forget Linoone; look what she did to Swalot! Ninjask, stop her, *now!"*

Make the bike's horn sound like a saxophone... Yukari scowled as a housefly buzzed around her head. "For autumn, the bugs are certainly out in force," she complained. "Hold still, you little devil..." Her hand blurred, swatting the fly into a streetlight. Pleased, she resumed walking. *There we go... now then, where was I... oh, right; transforming the bike into a one-vehicle orchestra...*

" *GAHH!* Why, that woman...! Vigoroths, *go!"*

I wonder if I should get one for Ran, too... ...no, she'd probably get her tails caught in the spokes. As entertaining it would be to watch her get them untangled, it's better to err on the side of caution... hmmm? Yukari stooped down, picking something up from the ground. A rush of air tickled the back of her neck. *It's getting colder already, huh... so, what is this?* She stood up, not feeling whatever it was that touched the back of her head, and frowned. *What sort of person just leaves a perfectly usable Super Potion sitting in the middle of the road?*

"Vigoroths, Slash Attack, both of you!"

And just when I was thinking no one littered around here, too... Yawning, Yukari stretched her arms and rotated them in a circle. Hearing a pair of impacts, she checked her possessions to make sure she hadn't dropped anything. *Hmm... everything seems to be in order... well, no sense dilly-dallying. Midori can't wait any longer.* Picking up the pace a little, she hurried on down the street; the Pokémon Center was only a few blocks away.

-GAP-

The band of teenagers gaped at the street in shock. Their Linoone? Slapped aside, taking Swalot with it and getting the poisonous Pokémon stuck halfway down a storm drain. Their Ninjask? Viewed as a pest, and dealt with accordingly. The Vigoroths for which they were named? Taken out with blows to the head and chin. Their Pokémon had scarcely even touched her.

"What...?! That lady...!" cried one of the gang members, his orange hair frazzled. "She did all that without even using her Pokémon!"

"That just ain't right," another boy agreed. This kid could be identified by both the Mightyena tattoo on his left arm and his shaved head. "Think we should tell the boss?"

"We can't do that! She's going to have our jackets when she finds out that we let an unarmed woman curbstomp us!" A third child protested, hands vanishing inside his oversized sleeves.

"Well, we have to do *something!"*

"Now, hold up just a moment." Vigoroth Number Four, their youngest (and smallest), stopped it from escalating into a shouting match. Her unkempt reddish-pink hair hid most of her face from view. "She's uber-strong without her Pokémon, right? If she sicced it on us, wouldn't we have been bullying a Salamence or somethin'?"

"You spend way too much time on the computer, Merril," the first teen complained.

"And you haven't spent *enough,* man."

"Would you guys stop arguing and help me get Swalot out of the storm drain?!" the fifth and final kid, the 'brute' of the group, complained as he struggled to pull out his Pokémon.

"Just return it to its Poké Ball so we can go home," Merril muttered. "Sheesh."

A sweatdrop. "Oh... right. Forgot about that."

We leave our protagonists and their associates behind for the moment to take a look at how the Human Village is faring.

Pokémon- - -the villagers knew them as 'those strange beasts'- - - were becoming increasingly common sights. A small tannish creature armed with a heavy wooden block had assisted a young man with a shed he was building. A flock of small brown birds, their species unrecognizable, roosted quietly in some trees near Keine's school and occasionally pecked at stray bits of food; they remained for only a day before taking wing towards parts unknown. An elderly fishermen told of a sizable red carp that he had caught, useless even for eating. Several fairies were pestering a couple that lived at the outskirts of the village, only to be chased away by a fire-breathing orange puppy. There was much speculation as to who and what they were, why no one had seen them before, and why few of their objectives coincided (speculation that was fueled by Aya's last issue of the Bunbunmaru). On the whole it seemed they didn't mean any serious harm, but one could never be too careful.

Reimu, having just met Blastoise, knew that they were all connected somehow. She'd had meetings with Keine and later Akyuu, telling them what Ran had informed her of and divulging some information on how they chose to fight. After the shrine maiden left, Akyuu had consulted a few people she knew and decided to see these creatures first-hand; a new race of beings meant more material for the Chronicles.

She would need protection, she knew. There were still plenty of youkai and fairies that would try to attack her if she went alone, including a few that she'd written about already. To that end, she handpicked three people to protect her when the time came to start the information hunt. She would've liked to have Reimu or Keine with her, but there was little time to waste and the latter was busy with her lessons anyway.

The first man was a descendant of an English-German tradesman who had been caught within Gensokyo's borders at the time the Great Hakurei Barrier had first been raised. Said descendant had changed his family name at his marriage, all the better to describe his unhappy mood. Despite running a successful second-hand store, few in the Human Village thought much of him as a person. His actions were unpredictable, his way of life unfathomable; rumor had it that he'd been responsible for getting Gensokyo's dumbest fairy a job at the dreaded Scarlet Devil Mansion. His painted-on mustache, large eyebrows and thick glasses-the latter because he believed his eyesight was going, although in truth Mystia Lorelei's singing had been responsible for it-made him easily recognizable.

Leonard wasn't a respectful man by nature, but after some discussion he finally agreed to Akyuu's request. "Hunting is more treble than its worth, so I might as well catch me some loud-mouthed bass," he'd said. "But if the notes get too high, I'm leaving my signature behind. Now get allegro and get out of my shop. You're blocking my view of the door."

Akyuu had nodded and left promptly, pretending that she'd understood him perfectly.

The second man was a born Outsider, a con artist who had dropped out of high school. Because he fit all of Yukari's criteria and was considered easily forgettable, she had no qualms with dropping him into Gensokyo. By some miracle he made it to civilization without being discovered by anyone (Rumia would've spotted him, but she was busy crashing into foliage). As the years passed he finally found his calling as a fisherman, although he still occasionally tried to con people to earn some quick yen. He knew the basics of Spell Card battles, what few attack patterns he had being based on fishing as a whole. He was incapable of flight, however, and his special ability lent itself better to piano playing than to combat.

"Ah, the young lady's out to catch one of them beasties, huh?" Martin answered when Akyuu went to recruit him. "Alright, I protect you. If

trouble strikes, you'll find me behind a rock."

Akyuu was already beginning to wonder about her choice of protectors.

The third and final individual, a half-Japanese man with curly red hair, was a former circus performer who had ventured into Gensokyo purely by accident. Showing some talent with throwing weaponry, he was immediately recruited as a watchman; he later learned enough about magic to fly, and even had several Spell Cards revolving around assorted circus tricks. He often seemed more interested in entertainment than fighting, due more to the somewhat improved relationship between humans and youkai than anything else. He always carried a pair of clippers in his pocket and had a varied collection of hair accessories, although no one as yet had made the connection between those traits and Reimu's wariness of him.

Pie smiled toothily and nodded when Akyuu requested his presence. Pleased that nothing seemed out of the ordinary with his acceptance, Akyuu turned to walk away- - -and discovered that he had managed to slip his leg into her arms while she'd been speaking.

They didn't have long to wait for the next sighting. The day after Pie was chosen for the team, another watchman reported that a fiery maned horse had been witnessed galloping around outside the village proper. A farmer expressed an interest in taming the horse, which added extra incentive for the unlikely foursome to capture it. The group- - -in various states of eagerness and quiet dread- - -met up at the entrance, as ready as they would ever be.

Leonard came prepared, carrying a sack full of equipment (which he immediately coerced Pie into carrying). "You need everything you can find to catch a horse," he claimed. "Why, in another reality I was a horse doctor. Whenever I caught a horse, my pharmacist would lie about the medicine."

"Oh, you just got a bad one," Martin told him, shouldering a fishing rod and carrying a box of assorted lures. How they'd be useful in catching a horse, Akyuu would never know. "You should've thrown it back."

"Which one, the horse or the pharmacist?"

"Whichever came with the stable. Now what's this about a farmer's sister?"

"Well, assistance made her life a gas. You should try it sometime."

"Maybe later. I could use a beer."

"A drink at *this* hour?"

"Sure. If I get assistance now, I'd never pay them back. Better if I gave *them* assistance, for their sake," Martin said, mispronouncing the drink as a one-syllable word.

Leonard looked offended at this. "Assistance from you would be more than they could stomach, you pain in the neck. Now come on. We've got a cold horse to treat."

"Was any of that in Japanese at *all?* " Akyuu asked as they walked, feeling left out of the loop. "I didn't understand a thing you two were saying."

"You need a grapple to overcome the language barrier, little girl, and I doubt they sell them in your size," Leonard answered bluntly, mentally running over some ways to catch the fire horse. Ingenuity would be the key here, he knew.

Pie reached into his coat, pulled out a large apple, and offered it to Leonard. The shopkeeper pushed it aside. "Not an apple. A *grapple.* Don't you know what a grapple is?"

Pie smiled in understanding, put the apple away, and pulled out a bunch of grapes instead.

Leonard shook his head. "Remember, Akyuu: never send a clown to do a man's job. And never send a man to do a clown's job. If more men were like clowns and more clowns were like men, life and comedy would be serious businesses."

One by one, the group stopped in the middle of the grassy plains bordering the village. Half a kilometer away were the dirt paths that led through the forest, and they didn't want to pass through there if they could avoid it. "So what you're saying is that the job requires a woman?" Akyuu inquired.

"No. If women were clowns, the population in the village would be lower. The local youkai wouldn't need any help, and that's if they didn't die laughing first. Send the schoolteacher at them, and they'd learn awful quick."

Akyuu recognized most of that statement as an insult. She opened her mouth to speak, but closed it when she remembered who she was dealing with. This wasn't the average human male. While no one was quite as rude as he was, she knew who the second-best had gotten it from. *I will not take the bait he is offering* .

"Hey, now. That'sa no good. Leave Achoo-san alone," Martin protested, not seeing the fiery horse walk up to Pie and eat the grapes out of his hand. "She's not bothering you. Why bother her?"

"Akyuu," the girl corrected.

"Excuse you."

"To have the right stuff, the pen must be mightier than the sword," Leonard declared. "But if you need a sword to write stuff, you've got other problems. I'd say that she looks like my dear wife, but that would be an insult to my wife. It's bad enough that our child left us."

Akyuu frowned. "You're confusing me. Should I take that as a compliment? ...And again, how much of that was in Japanese?"

"About as much as the horse is."

By the time Pie bothered to check his hand, a third of the grapes had been taken; he did a double-take, looking around for the culprit, but whoever it was had disappeared. He whistled, pointing out the grapes.

Martin shook his head. "That's too much of the sour stuff. Where'sa the horse?"

"Good question..." Akyuu pondered. "You'd think something giving off a lot of heat would be easy to find..."

"Maybe it don't like the cold weather?" Martin suggested. "Or maybe..." He smiled. "It's shy? That has to be it. You think it's shy?"

"A shy horse will brain you with its hooves just as easily as a nasty one will, and with you no one could tell the difference," said Leonard, rejecting that notion. "I say that it just plain doesn't like people."

Akyuu's eyes turned towards Pie and the fruit that he was still hanging on to. Unless someone like, say, a fairy or tanuki was joking with them, the food wouldn't disappear on its own. While Leonard occupied himself with rooting through the equipment sack, searching for a chain snare, the writer paid close attention to the trio's silent entertainer.

This time, she noticed the horse calmly and quietly sneaking up to Pie. Amused, she watched as it filched a few more grapes from him. "Pie-san, may I try a few of those?" Akyuu asked. "Those look tasty. What are those?"

Pie beamed pleasantly at her and started to hand them over... and recoiled when the horse poked its head in, not yet finished with its thievery. That got the others' attention awful quick. "There it is. Catch

it!" Martin shouted, dropping his fishing supplies and making a dive for the horse.

Said horse would have none of it. Neighing, it took a few steps back and permitted Martin to catch a dirt nap instead. The horse snorted, pleased, then turned and galloped away.

Martin pushed himself up, brushing dirt off his face and clothes, but Leonard spoke up before he could complain. "'Shy', eh? Looks like it took a hankering to Pie's fruit, chief."

The lights in Akyuu's head flickered on. "You three, do you mind if I take a shot at capturing it?" she inquired sweetly.

"How are you gonna do that, Achoo-san?" Martin asked, wondering what she was thinking as he picked up his equipment.

" *Akyuu* ."

"Excuse you."

Leonard shook his head. "That joke wasn't funny the first time, and it sure wasn't funny the second. Let the girl explain."

Akyuu sighed. *"Thank you.* Now, then... Pie, how much fruit do you have with you?"

Pie searched his coat pockets, producing a bag of cherries. Further searching was rewarded with some strawberries, more cherries, five or so peaches... and when a watermelon- - -neatly divided into four sections- - -were brought out, Akyuu boggled at the sight of it all. "That's... that's more than enough," she murmured, awed. "...You really *are* a clown." *And the favored fruit of the Celestials to boot?*

"Nah, it's nothing. His coat just has really big pockets," said Martin, laughing softly.

"Yes... but *an entire watermelon?"*

"Charting Pie leads to headaches," Leonard warned. "Trust me. So what's the plan, Hieda?"

"Gather around." Akyuu gestured at them to do so. "It's like this..."

Rapidash found the four humans to be entertaining overall. As it watched and listened from afar they would bicker and joke with each other, laughing and doing odd things. There was a certain sense of fellowship amongst them that it could sense; perhaps they or someone like them would be willing to accept the Pokémon. They didn't look like the type of humans who would do it harm (they really needed to learn the proper way to catch it, though).

Finally the strangely-dressed man pulled out a collection of fruit, and Rapidash's mouth watered a little. After some discussion three of the humans backed off, leaving the girl holding part of what resembled an all-green Watmel Berry. The human nibbled at the fruit, making happy little noises as she ate and taking care not to eat any of the seeds.

Thinking that the girl was harmless Rapidash walked across the plains towards her, snorting and muttering as it went. It stopped a meter away, judging the girl's reaction; she was sweating a little, perhaps from being in the presence of the Pokémon's majesty, but to her credit she didn't try to run away.

The human looked up to meet Rapidash's stare, her smile brave but meek. "Excuse me," she asked it, holding out the sort-of Watmel Berry, "but would you like something to eat? You seem hungry."

Rapidash had a good idea of what the girl was planning. *No Pokémon of her own? I see... she's trying to lull me into a false sense of security by offering me food. Clever tactic... it's just like what visitors would do back home to try and catch my kind.*

I've had my fun, and she's not being too *deceptive. I'll play her game for now. If any of them double-cross me, or if I tire of them, I can*

always run away.

Akyuu's smile widened when the horse came closer to her and took a few bites from the offered watermelon slice. She reached up with her free hand and tentatively patted the creature's muzzle. "There we go," she intoned. "That should hit the spot."

Now that the horse was right in front of her, Akyuu noticed something out of the ordinary. The beast's mane and tail flickered and burned, and she should have felt uncomfortable merely by standing near it; but there was no extreme sensation of heat or incineration. *I have to wonder... it was able to sneak up on us without any of noticing... so is it able to reduce the temperature of its flames somehow? Can it alter its properties in some way to make the fires... burn less? Make them harmless to touch?*

I don't understand, but protesting will not get me anywhere. I'll have to decide where to go from here, and quickly. I only have so much time to work with.

Most of the watermelon slice was gone. Still smiling and acting jovial on the whole, Akyuu began her walk back to the village gates while continuing to offer the horse food. The beast followed alongside, taking occasional bites of fruit, and before too long they had reached Gensokyo's center of civilization.

"How do you like that," Leonard groused as the trio followed from a safe distance. "I go to all the trouble of packing traps and survival equipment, and *this* happens. I should have packed me a pretty girl instead."

"Which reminds me. Where's your daughter?" Martin asked bluntly. "I haven't seen her here in a long time."

"I said a *pretty* girl," was Leonard's rebuttal. "I told her that if she ends her life with warts and green skin, it's on *her* head. And the rest

of her, too. She's not marrying anyone looking like that, even if I decided to carry magic trinkets at the store. *That* was a load off my back."

Pie made a face, disgusted, and Martin had to agree. "That ugly, huh?"

"Like the inside of a pig's nostril, but more contagious."

"That's ridiculous. You've seen the inside of a pig's nose?"

"Yes, but I had to quit if I wanted to save my bacon. Everyone thought I was chewing the scenery, when I was never hamming things up at all."

"You were accused of hogging the spotlight?"

"You catch on quick, Martin."

Darkrai's moveset: Dream Eater, Dark Void, Faint Attack, Nightmare

Approximate level: 85

Alice's Notes : To humans, youkai are nightmarish creatures. Even I, one who associates with humans of my own free will, can be frightening if sufficiently angered. But as the expression goes, there's always a bigger fish... I confess, seeing my assailant for the first time scared me on some level. Which makes me wonder: as the dark monster fled, I could feel its fear and anger... not at me for ordering it out, but at something else. Eirin Yagokoro suggested that maybe it attacked my subconscious out of self-defense, but what could've scared such a force enough to do so? And do I dare to seek the answer to that question?

Rapidash's moveset: Agility, Flame Wheel, Fury Attack, Bounce

Approximate level: 45

Akyuu's Notes: Thanks to Marisa's ghost familiar, we now have a name for the horse. We also know that "Rapidash" has been looking for a worthy human to lead it for some time now, which its new owner undoubtedly fits; but we are still in the dark as to how to develop its abilities... but speaking of, the farmer delivered a bagful of unknown items to me while I was meeting with someone. Could they be clues, perhaps? A request for Kourindou's owner to come here might be in order.

Never Mock The Cookie

MONSTERS IN PARADISE

Chapter Four Point Five

By: Curtis Wildcat

"One *more* thing...!" - Uncle, *Jackie Chan Adventures*

An author, a librarian and a clown walk into a bar... eh, skip it. That's not how the joke goes, anyway.

Patchouli and the others at the Mansion had come to the consensus that if they had seen these 'Pokémon' in the Forest and other outlying areas, doubtless the villagers had their share of experiences too. She had met Hieda-san once before, and while she was prejudiced against youkai she was still an easy human to deal with. "Working with them would be to our benefit," the magician had told Remilia, "and it would serve to make the information we've gathered widely known. We do not need to keep anything worthwhile to ourselves."

And so it was that Patchouli had volunteered to meet with Hieda-san, intent on offering her a proposal: to combine the resources of human and youkai alike.

She hadn't imagined that she would become irritated before the meeting even began, though. Upon arriving and making known her intentions, she was greeted by a smiling man in a top hat. The clown- - -Patchouli had a hard time thinking of him as anything else- - -then escorted her inside and served her tea straight from his coat.

If Patchouli hadn't thought he was odd before, what happened next convinced her that he was bonkers: the man reached out to her, arms outstretched as if he wanted to take her in his arms. Not

wanting any of that, she drifted and darted just out of his grasp thrice before finally snapping off a few wood element bullets right over his head. The message was clear: *Stop chasing me or else.* The man was visibly disappointed, but seemed to accept it with good humor.

The key word, though, was 'seemed'.

Some months ago, after one of Marisa's thefts, Reimu had successfully broken a seal on one of the librarian's tomes; Patchouli had silently acknowledged afterword that there was a weakness in having all of her knowledge come from books, as the method for removing the seal was nowhere to be found in the library. Similarly, for everything that she learned over the course of her life, Patchouli had comparatively little experience with social interactions (beyond those with whom she dealt with daily). Neither her research nor her recreational reading had prepared her for any personal dealings with the oddities of the male mind.

No sooner had she sat down again and turned her back to him than Patchouli felt an unfamiliar weight on her head. She reached her hand up and removed whatever it was, seeing the man's hat. Frowning, she turned and handed it back to him. "Any particular reason for this?"

The only answer she was given was a loud "honnnk" from the horn the man was carrying. Patchouli was not impressed. "Who are you? And why don't you speak?"

Again the main said nothing, only smiling and offering her hat back to her... ***What?*** *Please tell me he didn't...* She patted the top of her head, finding nothing. *He did.* Grabbing her cap and putting it back where it belonged, Patchouli glared at him. "I didn't do anything to you. Quit annoying me."

The man drew lines in the air, whistling with each one.

"Well, yes. Youkai aren't *supposed* to be hugged by strangers. It kills any credibility they have," Patchouli said. "I shot at you for my own

safety."

A door on the other side of the room slid open, admitting Akyuu. "I apologize for the wait. Is Pie-san troubling you?" she asked as she walked in and sat down.

Patchouli met her eyes, nodding in greeting. "Not *too* much, but he *is* rather wonky..." She trailed off as that weight settled on her head again. "Quit it, you," she bit out, smacking the top hat back off her head.

Pie retrieved his hat, but just as quickly displaced Patchouli's cap from its sitting place. This elicited a growl from the youkai magician. "Retrieve it and put it back. My patience is wearing thin, and I would like to finish my business *before* my friend wakes up."

Pie complied with her wish, if 'taking the cap and stacking it atop the first one' was what it meant to comply with something.

Akyuu hid her mouth with her kimono's sleeve so that no one could see her grin. "Behave yourself, Pie-san. You are in the presence of Patchouli Knowledge; please don't anger her. Your prowess in magical combat comes nowhere close to matching hers."

Patchouli was pleased to see the clown's mouth drop open in shock. Contritely, he deposited the hat- - - *both* of them- - -atop her cranium, making the pleasure evaporate into nothing.

A fuzzy black and white title card, a fancy border decorating the upper and lower edges, appeared. The words "Eighty Seconds Later" were stenciled across the middle. A snippet from Scott Joplin's Magnetic Rag regaled the readers for all of five seconds before the card disappeared forever, returning them to the work in progress.

"I'm glad you remember me," the youkai magician said, swiping her cap back and placing it on her head with an 'and that's *final'* air. "We

spoke once before when you were working on your latest compilation."

There was a quiet sound of metal sliding against metal. Patchouli turned her head, seeing Pie smiling and waving innocently from behind her. Still suspicious of him but waiting for an answer from Akyuu, she sat down and refocused her attention on the author.

Akyuu didn't seem to mind the distraction. "Yes, I recall you just fine. What is it you want to speak to me about?"

"It's about these animals... these 'Pokémon', I'm told they're called."

"'Pokémon'...?"

"Yes. They're the talk of the village, and we've been meeting up with them at the Mansion ourselves. Reactions have ranged from indignant to delighted, and their existence is a complete mystery. In light of these developments, I'm proposing that we combine our resources."

Another metallic noise. Patchouli again regarded Pie; the marksman clown was nibbling at some onigiri. She suspected that he was hiding something in his pocket- - -...

"By combining our resources, you mean...?" Akyuu asked, successfully holding back her smile at Pie's antics.

"Nothing less than a guide as to what they are and how to handle them." Patchouli dismissed Pie out of her mind, sipping her tea. He was more annoying than dangerous, anyway, and had decided that the best way to deal with him would be to not encourage him. "I've secured Marisa Kirisame's services in this regard; the Pokémon with her is a telepath, capable of translating their speech for our benefit..."

"Excuse me, Patchouli-san?" Akyuu interrupted, drinking from her own share of tea.

"...What is it, Hieda-san?"

"You wouldn't have met anyone named 'Leonard' by some chance, have you?"

"No, I haven't." Patchouli frowned. "...Why?"

Akyuu folded her arms, huffing. "I've had enough recent dealings with the Kirisame family to last me the rest of this life. I will help you with this 'guide', but I'd much rather that *you* worked with Marisa."

Patchouli stared into her tea, mood edging towards disappointment. "I see... is this 'Leonard' you speak of really that problematic?" She raised the cup to her lips and took another sip.

"With good reason," Akyuu affirmed. "He's Marisa's father."

"...! Mmmph! Mu- - -!" Patchouli almost choked on her tea. After a few seconds she was able to work it down, shaking off both Akyuu and Pie's attempts to help her, and she stared at the former with her eyes narrowed. "Marisa's *father.* I don't believe it. That means that some poor woman actually *birthed* her. And here I thought people with her qualities spontaneously came into being out of- - -"

The librarian never finished her sentence. A noisy high-pitched whinny, and the repeated thuds of hooves hitting the floor, interrupted her. A new arrival barged uninvited into the room: the fire-maned horse that Akyuu's team had set out to catch. The equine slowed down, stepping lightly around the low table before halting.

Akyuu recognized the man that sat atop the horse. He was the farmer that had requested a chance to tame said beast, and he seemed to have done a decent job of it in such a short time (although it *was* noted to be rather docile in nature). He was unconventional for a villager, wearing boots, brown pants, suspenders and nothing else. Tough-looking, too, and he had a mustache to die for; no one in their right mind dared to cross him. As

everyone stared at him, the chronicler thought for sure that she heard a guitar playing in the background somewhere.

The farmer didn't linger long. He passed a small bag of unfamiliar items to Akyuu, nodded once at Pie, then tugged lightly on the horse's reins. With a whinny, the horse whirled around and exited the room at full gallop.

Hands trembling, Patchouli stared Akyuu in the eyes; there was something not quite right about her expression. "Since when... do you humans... walk about... in broad daylight... like that?" she whispered, her breathing becoming increasingly labored. Her face, too, was a bright shade of red.

"No one knows why he does that," Akyuu informed her, sweatdropping. "He just showed up one day and started working the fields like he had always been there. We know he's from the outside, but he's never talked about himself or his ways. Or about anything else, for that matter."

Pie honked his horn once, nodding. Patchouli looked back at him, then at Akyuu. "You mean to say that... full time he goes around like...?"

A nod from Akyuu, and another honk from Pie.

"Hieda-san... can I ask you a favor...?"

"As long as it isn't important. What do you need?" Akyuu didn't mind working with youkai on a professional basis, but she always remained leery of them on the whole.

Thankfully the request wouldn't be difficult to carry out. "...I don't mean to impose... but I am not feeling as good as I had been five minutes ago... Do you have someplace where I could lie down?"

"Honnnkkk."

" And for crying out loud *... get him to shut that stupid thing up!"*

After she woke up later, Patchouli realized that her hat's crescent moon was missing.

Author's Note

And today's life lesson is this: get a full night's sleep. Otherwise, your imagination goes on vacation without leaving you a note.

Intermission 1

MONSTERS IN PARADISE

Intermission #1

By: Curtis Wildcat

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In answer to the question posed by Gray Shadow: Yes.

Anyway, for those that read the previous one and half chapters, I confess: I'm sure most of you who know anything about comedy guessed correctly, but Leonard, Martin and Pie were meant to be the Marx Brothers (Groucho, Chico and Harpo respectively). Not the actors themselves, of course, but closer to the sort of characters they played in the films.

And no, I haven't eschewed the story's plot in favor of a crack fic conversion. Of that much you can be assured.

As for this, I figured you all deserved a break after an onslaught of wordplay and slapstick (and so do I, in light of a recent cold), so here's something shorter and plenty more peaceful (er, sort of). Sit back and relax.

"...Your brain is damaged. There's no explanation for it."

"What? What are you talking about?"

"The black thing you've got on your head, stupid. What is *that* supposed to be?"

"Oh, this is my new hat. Not that I care, but what do you think?"

Kaguya had been bored that night, and she'd walked around Eientei in a vain search for something to do. Seeing Reisen's little friend Swift minding her own business, she'd picked her up and placed the struggling inaba-like animal on her head. Mokou, intent on picking another fight with the exiled princess, had shown up a few minutes later.

And if the guffaws were anything to go by, Mokou didn't approve of the latest fashion in Gensokyo.

"Come on! This is the heaviest headwear I've ever worn! Give me *some* credit for ingenuity!"

"Kaguya, if you walked around in public like that, I'd pay to see their reactions!" Mokou grinned and folded her arms. "There's nothing ingenius about that, trust me."

" *Sure* it's ingenius!" Kaguya reached up, picked up Swift, and held it out towards Mokou. "This little rabbit here's a vicious beast. Careful, or it'll nibble your face off- - -OW!"

Having had enough of this treatment, Swift reached down and bit Kaguya's hand, prompting a quick release. Landing safely on all fours, the Umbreon sneered at her before retreating to the door.

Mokou smirked. "Are you done embarrassing yourself yet? You know why I'm here, so let's get to it."

"Tch... fine." Kaguya patted her hand, wincing but deciding that the miniscule ache was better off ignored. "You're the reason why I'm bored, after all." She plucked a jewelled branch from her sleeve as she took to the air.

Mokou's smirk turned a few levels more dangerous. "So dependent on our eternal struggle? Just keep ticking me off, then!" she yelled as she got some altitude. A searing birdlike aura manifested itself

around her, and the space between her and Kaguya was permeated with fire and shining bullets.

From the safety of Eientei's doors, Swift watched with nervous awe as the two immortal beings dueled.

(BGM - Outlaw Star OST - *Tsuki No Ie*)

Facing south at the very top of Flandre's room was a tiny window, small enough that she could not fit through it. With its location and with the landscaping that was done outside, the chances of any sunlight actually shining down into the room were next to none. She was quietly thankful for the window, for without it she would not be able to follow the passage of time past the clock tower's nightly ringing.

She knew it was now night time. The entertaining little fairy maid assigned to her was asleep outside her door. Meiling would be keeping her eyes open for intruders. Sakuya would be bustling about, caring for the Mansion and her big sister's needs (*Doesn't she ever sleep?* , Flandre wondered for the thousandth time). Speaking of Remilia, she would probably be sitting outside beneath the stars or lounging in the library, enjoying a fine cup of tea and conversation with Patchouli. Around here, there was constant activity during the night... and she always wished she could be a part of it.

Leaning on the windowsill with one elbow and staring up at the stars, Flandre listened to life: the light breathing of Skarmory, nesting in the remains of a destroyed dresser in one corner of the room; the bugs and other night creatures that populated the garden outside, and the haphazard attempts of Sakuya's staff as they did their job to the best of their lackluster ability. More than five centuries after she was turned, the younger Scarlet still felt confident that someday her exile to this room would come to a permanent end. She wanted to play tag and duel against Skarmory, Reimu and Marisa beneath the pale moonlight, take piano lessons and create her own little theme song...

even help Sakuya occasionally with the cleaning, just to prove she was willing to try.

Big plans, they were, and there was no guarantee that they would ever come to pass. But as the saying went, all you have to do is dream.

Blaziken stood alone atop a boulder twice its size, gazing up at the same starfield.

The fire-type Pokémon had recognized a kindred spirit in that red-haired human (or whatever she was), the same kind of spirit that he had seen in Zanthia back when he was still a Torchic. Every morning since they had first fought, he would visit the guard and challenge her to a fight; just because he didn't know where he was, that was no excuse for slacking off. He had taken a break from its personal training to consider the improvements he had made as a result of these duels, and a stray glance at the sky reminded him that these were not the same stars he was accustomed to seeing.

There were none of the familiar patterns and constellations that his trainer liked to point out. There was no Rayquaza, no Poké Ball, no Onix, Mightyena fangs or Power Bracer. It was all very mysterious to him, as he didn't have the kind of mind that could consider the mysteries of the universe for hours on end. All he could comprehend was that he was far from home, snatched from the ground he'd stood on by an unrelenting rainbow grip. It was disrespectful to the fighting-type for such a thing to be done to him, and he hated it.

Sitting down on the boulder, Blaziken continued watching the sky. He wondered what Zanthia was up to at the moment, and hoped that she was doing well.

Swiftly recovering with the aid of Eirin's medicine and the dark Pokémon nowhere to be found, Alice slept peacefully. No outside force disturbed her this night.

Elsewhere in the Forest of Magic, Marisa too was in a deep slumber. Mismagius flitted around the house, obeying her new master's last order to protect it; this was misleading on the magician's part, as she really wanted the "ghost hat" to leave her alone for the night's duration.

The village was at peace as its residents rested from their labors. Since it was not yet a full moon, this also applied to Keine. Only Akyu was still awake, ink brush in hand as she penned her thoughts on the Pokémon she'd met so far.

Like all the other (non-immortal) humans in Gensokyo, Reimu had purchased an all-night passage to Dream Land. Her rest was peaceful, for she had known from the start that the shrine's newest protector was there to watch over her and alert her to danger.

Outside the shrine, its head and limbs retracted inside its shell, Blastoise snored on.

It was growing. Slowly, at that, but it was growing.

Whether it was caused by the gratuitous sunlight available in the Garden of the Sun or something else, Yuuka had detected signs of an increasing strength in her sentient plant. It was hopping about a hair quicker, and its Master Spark-esque energy beam- - -Yuuka had taken to calling it the "Sun Spark" for simplicity- - -had just a little more power. The leaves it would throw about in self-defense were sharper, just a smidgen. It would take a very long time before it reached its full strength, but that was alright with the Flower Master: she had nothing but time to work with.

Yuuka now had someone to talk to on her walks who was agreeable in all sorts of ways. She was beginning to make some headway in understanding the plant's words, its speech entering her realm of comprehension. She learned several things about it: when it wasn't taking in sunlight or absorbing water and nutrients from the Garden's

soil, it had a preference for dry food. Also, it and the large mantis she'd seen from time to time spoke the same language, disregarding the different speech patterns; she'd ascertained this from the brief greetings they'd exchanged the last time they'd crossed paths. It was all very intriguing to her.

Now, reclining on her bed at Mugenkan, Yuuka pondered two objects that occupied the space next to her. The first was a recent issue of the Bunbunmaru, the same one that- - -unbeknownst to Yuuka- - - had gotten Alice's attention. The other was a peculiar orange rock that had caught her eye while she'd roamed the Garden...

When the humans are away, the youkai will play.

Somewhere far away from civilization, squeals and childish giggling echoed in the night. This batch of youkai (plus one yousei) had little in common, save that they had been brushed aside by Reimu so easily in combat. One by one, they had met up with each other over the years and decided that hanging out wasn't a bad idea. Tonight, they had come together to duel and play the hours away; they would be dog tired by morning, but since they were supposed to be nocturnal anyway that was fine with them.

Sitting on a sturdy tree branch, Ran and Creampuff watched as Chen darted around the foliage. Her fleetness of foot enabled her to evade everything that Wriggle Nightbug and Cirno were shooting at her. Rumia and Mystia, out of the game for some reason or another, cheered them all on.

The acrobatic Chen cartwheeled, somersaulted, and flipped around a prolonged barrage and- - -after about fifteen shots flew wide- - - pegged Wriggle with a fist-sized bullet; the firefly youkai pouted and rubbed her forehead, but accepted her loss and flew off to the side. There was no anger to be had here, and they knew it.

Ran saw Creampuff's mouth open and close repeatedly, and she smiled at his incredulity. *I can tell by looking at him. He wants to be*

capable of those same feats, to experience the freedom that only flight can bring. Ah, such youth. She cupped her chin in thought, now ignoring the game in progress beneath her. *I wonder...*

"..."

A tiny hand slowly turning the pages of a library book.

The half-lidded stare of the relentless.

"..."

Thump.

Well, *almost* relentless.

"Um, Miss Librarian? Your daughter's fallen asleep in the books again... shouldn't she be put to bed by now?"

Author's Message: I've been distracted by the Teen Titans, amongst other things, so be patient with me as regards the next chapter. Until then, ciao mein, everyone.

Kanako, Cirno

MONSTERS IN PARADISE

Chapter Five

By: Curtis Wildcat

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To answer the anonymous reviewer: No. And in the future, if those of you reviewing anonymously have any questions, would you be willing to just wait and see whether your question is answered in the fanfic? I just don't feel comfortable replying to people's reviews in the chapter itself when that space could be devoted to telling the story. Thank you.

Those of you who hate 100-degree weather, perpetual tiredness and repeated distractions, raise your hands. ...I thought so. Anyway, find the reference to Simcity 2000 and treat yourself to a candy bar.

Sanae was bored. Bored, irritated, and cranky.

She was seated in the room set aside for her in the Moriya shrine, an old book in her hands. It had been one of her possessions that she had been able to take with her to Gensokyo, albeit not one that she particularly liked; her associates had long ago given it to her, and only their insistance that it would somehow be "important" had kept her from burning it immediately. Just a short time before, Kanako and Suwako had decided that the time had come for her to study it, to remind herself of things that she had forgotten.

But Sanae had forgotten those things for a reason. *I don't want to know any of this!* she mentally complained. *I was happy when we left the outside behind and came to Gensokyo. It meant that I didn't have*

*to deal with that gargantuan franchise that my classmates liked so much, their endless yammering about it, their **obsession** . It's just... it's just not me!*

But the truth was that she had no choice in the matter. She was devoted to Kanako, and if the goddess felt that there was something worthwhile to be had in this endeavor, then so be it. And it hadn't been a suggestion for her to read this book; it was an *order.* The franchise had finally followed them into Gensokyo, and it had done so in a way that left no doubt: It was the real deal.

"If I ever meet the person responsible for this," Sanae promised darkly, "he's going to *need* a miracle to escape his well-deserved beatdown."

"Or 'her', case depending," Suwako's voice added from outside the room.

The human goddess chuckled uneasily.

-A Couple Nights Ago-

All was quiet on the home front. Sanae was asleep, tired from a long day of working and dealing with the tengu. The news hounds- - -more specifically, Aya and later Hatate- - -had both insisted on getting the trio's opinions on the newcomers to Gensokyo. Suwako had directed the questions to Kanako both times; Kanako, in turn, claimed that it "would build character" and passed the buck to Sanae. By the end of it all, the group's only human (or as close as it got considering her status, anyway) was frazzled and wondering aloud why she was being pressed about creatures that didn't exist.

Kanako personally didn't understand what all the fuss was about. Sure, there was that backlash about the seizures, and the discontinuity that seemed to have fallen into place regarding one of the supposed perpetrators. Yes, a few of those that actually visited

the shrine on the outside had been die-hard fans of the series, and kept running their mouths when they didn't know who'd been listening in. And okay, maybe some of her charge's classmates in school were the same way. Still, she didn't think that Sanae was being entirely fair to the newcomers. If something akin to that Hisoutensoku deal from a while back appeared in Gensokyo, she would have been positively thrilled.

Anyway, Kanako had yet to actually meet one of these Pokémon for herself. She had remained on top of the mountain for most of the week, thoughts in motion tending to stay in motion. Some of those thoughts after the meetings with the tengu had turned to ideas for faith gathering, using the Pokémon as a means to an end. During a group meeting, Suwako had seen things a bit differently and expressed a need for caution, warning that the Pokémon might take offense if they felt they were being used wrongly; it wasn't likely that they had the same hierarchy as humans or youkai, being a different sort of lifeform altogether. They'd finally agreed to look into things more closely before taking action. Sanae... not so much, as she vehemently continued to deny the creatures' existence.

In the mood for some relaxation, Suwako was now gliding about the Wind God's Lake. Hovering just four centimeters over the lake as she flew, occasionally her foot would reach down and make waves by skimming the surface. She'd tried spelling out the characters in her name this way, but the waves always settled down before they could show anything legible.

"You pick the oddest times to try that," Kanako called out as she hovered near the shoreline. "It isn't like anyone is around to watch you."

"Yes, but then I'd be busy maintaining my image as a dignified elder goddess!" Suwako returned, swinging her arms about in a steady rhythm. Each time, her sleeves came within a hair's breadth of touching the water.

Kanako shook her head, the corners of her lips twitching upwards. "You're the size of the village children, and you're behaving like a crazed aerobics instructor. If it weren't for the power you emit, no one would know that you *were* an elder goddess."

"'Crazed aerobics instructor'? Take that back!" Suwako huffed. "I'm not crazed, just unusual!"

"Fine, fine." Kanako waved her off. "Whatever floats your boat. Me? I have some thinking to do about- - -"

A vibration in the water and air cut her off. Another one shook the vicinity, then another. Suwako decelerated and stopped, righting herself and examining the water's surface with an odd look on her face. Kanako opened her mouth, intent on asking the smaller goddess what was going on...

Reality rumbled around them, rattling the air molecules like sugar being shaken in a glass container. A marble curtain was shredded with unbelievable force, clattering to the floor in tatters. The simile and metaphor both served to describe the sensations that the both of them felt as the lake rippled and trembled. Being airborne did not prevent the need to keep themselves balanced.

" *Ennh...! What the...?!* What's this power I'm feeling...?! " Suwako's eyes were unaturally wide as she made tracks- - -or plowed through the air, rather- - -towards the shoreline, waves shooting off to the sides as she went. Inwardly, it almost felt as if she were treading quicksand.

Kanako summoned her onbashira to her, teeth gritted. " Suwako... something is very wrong...! I hope you're ready; if this gets nasty, then you'd better wake up Sanae!"

"If she sleeps through *this,* I'm thinking we need to reconsider her workload!"

They needn't have worried about rousing her. The sensations gradually eased off, and reality's upset stomach stopped complaining; all was calm once more. The Wind God's Lake was as quiet as it had ever been, with the only sign of its discontent being the waves that splashed and receded against the shoreline.

Suwako, no longer feeling bogged down, allowed a confused glance at Kanako. "...You know as much about this as I do. Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"The calm before the storm, as people say." Kanako folded her arms, staring hard at the lake's surface. She made no move to discard the onbashira. "There would not have been this much of a ruckus without *something* resulting from it. That power shook us to the core, Suwako, something that should not have happened unless the source of it was magnificent beyond the mortal mind."

"Hmmm..."

Experimentally, Suwako summoned a trio of large boulders from the shoreline and hurled them into the Lake. Sitting down in her favored froglike position, she watched as the rocks sunk lower...

...and lower...

...and lower...

...and lower...

...until the muffled sound of earth thudding against something reached her ears...

"HWAAAAAAAA-RHHHHRRRRRRR!"

...and the Wind God's Lake started to churn. Faster and faster it went, swirling around violently and splashing water into the faces of the Moriya Shrine's co-goddesses. They ignored it, watching as the

lake was transformed into a gigantic whirlpool with nothing but the beastly scream as a catalyst.

Lightning flashed and thunder clapped in the near distance, and Suwako blinked as she felt several raindrops strike her hands. "Huh?" She looked up, seeing thick rainclouds form over the mountain. "Kanako, did you have anything to do with this?" she asked as the skies poured rain onto their heads.

She knew the answer even before Kanako replied to her. "Not a thing. Whatever is happening, our visitor here is the cause of it." The taller goddess raised her hand towards the air, her powers at work; the downpour did not stop altogether, but lessened enough that it would not hinder their flight or damage the shrine. The clouds expanded, then dispersed as the storm spread out across Gensokyo.

Feet repeatedly struck the ground nearby as Sanae rushed over to join them, trying in vain to keep the rain out of her eyes. "Kanako-sama! Suwako-sama! What's going on here? What did you do?"

"Oh, sure," Suwako muttered. "Blame us."

"I-I didn't mean it quite like that," Sanae hastily apologized. "But what's happening? What's- - -"

"HWAAAAAA-RHHHHHHHHRRRRRRRRR!"

"- - -...that?" she finished meekly.

It took an agonizing half minute before the monstrous beast finally rose from the center of the whirlpool, but rise it did, with all the flash and thunder that they expected of a legendary deity in physical form. The appearance was completely different from what- - -or *whom* - - - they had expected, but the fury with which it had arrived and its apparently short temper made Kanako wonder aloud: "Suwako, does this feel at all like Ryujin's power to you?"

"It's not," Sanae bit out coldly. She turned and paced back and forth. "This is nothing like Ryujin."

"HWAAA-RHHHRR! ...HWWWAAAA-RRRHHHHRR!"

"Aaaand you'd know this *how?* " Suwako inquired, wondering why she was so sure of this.

"They were right. The tengu were right! Lugia is here! Lugia... is... here... in Gensokyo!" Sanae fumed, outright ignoring the goddess's question. Raising her voice, she stopped where she was and screamed at the storm clouds: "In the name of the entire Shinto pantheon, *please tell me you're kidding!"*

Kanako and Suwako's sweatdrops were washed away by the rain...

"HWA-RHRRRRR!"

And the goddesses almost followed suit. As the Pokémon was too angry to tell who or what it was attacking, Lugia's Hydro Pump almost drowned them above ground. The width of the attack was more than twice as wide as Lugia's mouth, and the storm served to increase its strength and density even further. The trio were not about to sit still and let the Hydro Pump hit them, though, and they split off in three directions. Scant millimeters were all that separated them from a watery smackdown, the blast instead washing away a substantial amount of sand, rock and gravel.

With the battle now joined, the Moriya group decided to deal swift retribution. They had been attacked at their own home by a (supposedly) fictional menace; unlike Reimu and Marisa's actions years before, there was nothing truly harmless about what Lugia had just done. It came dealing rage, and it would receive rage in return.

Suwako struck from the left, alternating between watery sprays from her mouth- - -their power doubling in strength from the storm, like the Hydro Pump before it- - -and materialized boulders. As Lugia screamed and swiped at her with its wing, forcing her to stop what

she was doing and scoot backwards, Kanako swooped in from the right. A storm of thick lasers, representative of onbashira, kept Lugia temporarily immobilized while a blistering barrage of talismans from Sanae assailed it from the front. By sustaining this triple-pronged attack, they hoped to finish this quickly and decisively.

"HWAAAAAAAA-RHHHHRRRRRRR!"

"...?"

Something about that roar made Kanako flinch, and she stopped firing for just a second. That was all the distraction that Lugia needed. Ignoring the rocks and talismans that continued to pound it, it reared back its head and opened its mouth...

The whites of her eyes were as wide as saucers, whereas her pupils were tinier than pencil tips. Tension mounted in her heart and lungs as the winds gathered, and her arms stiffened as she tried to sustain her attack. She knew now that Lugia cared not one whit for Gensokyo's way of life, and dread in its purest form had Sanae in its grip. There are so many ways that the phrase "oh, dear" can be conveyed, and lots of them could have been expressed in the second it took Lugia to charge up its attack, but Sanae was not going to argue about how to tell of her terror. She didn't need to.

Before she could so much as shout "Aeroblast!", it was already on its way. Those rocks, talismans and lasers that were nearest were scattered and disintegrated in the face of a tightly compressed tornado. Sanae was clipped by the 300-kilometer-an-hour winds; she spun off course and plunged into the lake, temporarily blacking out on impact and getting caught in the whirlpool left in Lugia's wake. Suwako was able to evade the Aeroblast as it swept towards her, but on seeing Sanae's plight she immediately dove down to save her.

This left Kanako. Lugia took a few moments to breathe, still simmering in the boiling water of its anger... ***"HWAAA-RHHRR!"*** ...then let fly with another Aeroblast right at her face.

The goddess's lips twitched, making the transition from a wondering frown to a soft smile. "I know not where your child is, mighty one..." Putting the faith that others had in her to good use, she subconsciously strengthened herself; no tornado, with or without magic, would break her defenses. "...But I can assure you..." With both hands she caught the edges of the Aeroblast, its rampaging circulation not budging her one measly millimeter. "...That your anger, while justified, *is directed the wrong way."*

Sweeping her arms to her sides, no longer noticing the assault she'd been warding off, she tore the Aeroblast cleanly in half. The winds that comprised the attack broke apart and dispersed, stunning Lugia and rocking it back long enough for Kanako to get into its face. It recoiled, not having expecting her to attempt a melee attack, and flinching as she brought her power to bear...

"Calm yourself, mighty one."

But Kanako didn't attack, not using her mastery over the winds and rain to assault her opponent. Instead, the fog around Lugia's mind lifted, and she saw the blue-haired woman for what she was: a divine presence, able to soothe and defend just as easily as she could attack. ***"Hwaa-rhrrr..."*** the Pokémon rumbled, realizing that this woman and her friends could not possibly have taken her child away.

At the same time, Lugia was conflicted. If they hadn't kidnapped her child- - -Silver, as she recalled that young human calling it once- - - then who did? Where was it? More to the point, where was she? Dimly she heard her other two attackers shout something as they charged back up from the lake, only to stop short as Kanako explained the situation to them. The green-haired one looked ready to bite metal, but reluctantly kept herself from shooting off more of those strange sheets of paper.

Kanako must have sensed Lugia's unease. "You are troubled," she intoned, her power still clearly felt. "That is no secret. I am Kanako

Yasaka, co-goddess of the Moriya Shrine. Now what seems to be the problem, I wonder?"

For the first time that she could remember, as not even those children who had helped protect Silver had earned this great an honor, Lugia fully opened up her mind to this woman and her associates in the hopes that they could help her. Kanako frowned as the images crossed her mind, the deep-voiced speech accompanying them telling her of the wicked strength that separated her from her child. The small one with the strange hat narrowed her eyes as she learned of Lugia's violent retaliation, struggling valiently against whoever brought her here but no avail. Their charge, the most aggressive of the three, only began to reconsider her stance when she was told that Silver still was not full grown; he was ill-prepared to deal with the world at large, and had already been in danger *once* from thieves, so the Pokémon was afraid of what might happen while she was absent.

The trio in turn told Lugia what they knew of Gensokyo, carefully explaining to her that she had been transported across worlds. The culprit likely had no benevolent motives in doing this, as it felt like their essences were being violently shaken while the move was in progress. It wasn't hard to understand once they elaborated on it, since Lugia herself had once been revered as a god. In any event, everything that was happening did not sit well with her.

"I have to go home," Lugia stated bluntly. ***"That much is obvious."***

"The question is 'how'," Suwako informed her. "None of us know a way to send you home, and even if we did, there's still that mysterious force to consider. If it found you once, it may find you again."

" ***I can not remain still. Anyone who would dare take me away from my child must be dealt with appropriately!"*** Lugia screamed, the waters below her crashing against the rocks in response to her psychic cry.

"And we understand that." Kanako held up a hand. "But lashing out angrily and aimlessly will accomplish nothing. Not only will you not get to where you want to go, but you may end up endangering the lives of the mountain's inhabitants. We have to think this through."

"We could ask around," Sanae suggested reluctantly. "There's no shortage of magicians and such in Gensokyo. Maybe they could send her home if they found something of use." Some of her old fury returned, something which almost made Suwako try to hold her back. "I'm not bringing this up because I like you. I don't want you here any more than you want to be here. You understand?"

"...If you feel that you will accomplish something by your methods... then fine," Lugia conceded as she made her final decision. ***"But I can not wait forever for a solution to present itself. I must return underwater, for only by hibernation can I pass the time appropriately and regain my strength. If you do not have something for me by the time I rouse myself..."*** She forsook her telepathy and roared in Kanako's face, blasting her hair straight out behind her.

"...Right. Consider your warning received," Kanako acquiesced, ignoring Suwako's quiet giggling.

Lugia had no further words for them. Sharply diving down, it plunged into the center of the whirlpool it had arisen from. Almost as if it could sense her quieting mental state and desire to sleep, the lake's agitation put itself into reverse.

At last the whirlpool created by Lugia's screams ceased to be, and the Wind God's Lake became steadily calmer as the legendary Pokémon settled into her promised sleep. The water was still choppy in a few places, as if to remind the goddesses once again that she would reawaken if they didn't make good on their promise, but then the only disturbance left was the rain that pounded the surface. It would take a little while longer before the clouds were cleared from the sky.

The trio was quiet for some time as they observed the lake, not caring if the rain soaked them. Kanako and Suwako were both concerned at Lugia's presence in their home, curious as to the sort of higher power that could displace such a force. Sanae, although still displeased from having fallen into the water (and her subsequent revival by Suwako), privately wondered what would become of Lugia's child without its mother to protect it; a slight twinge was all that betrayed her worry.

"Sanae."

The human goddess faced down at Suwako. "Yes, Suwako-sama?"

"I seem to recall there being a colorful book amongst your keepsakes from the outside." The smaller of the duo smiled over at Kanako, winking. "A guide to these... Pokémon. Tomorrow morning, I want you to find it."

"Certainly, Suwako-sama," Sanae agreed, quick to support her in any way she could. "I was wanting to destroy it anyway. I can take care of that before my morning chores, if you'd like."

Kanako smirked as she understood what Suwako had requested. "Not quite. With these Pokémon out and about, and with one right here on top of Youkai Mountain, the situation calls for drastic measures. Knowledge is the name of the game, Sanae. I want you to sit in your room, take the guidebook... *and read it."*

Lightning flashed, illuminating Sanae's gobsmacked face.

"WHAAAAATTTTT?!"

-GAP-

Present Time

-GAP-

After picking up Midori from the Pokémon Center the following morning and having her breakfast there, Yukari mulled over the options available to her.

According to the map in her possession, going straight west from Mauville would take her to Verdanturf Town. Not far away was a tunnel that would take her within a day's walking distance from Rustboro City. Her second choice was another western route situated somewhere between Mauville and Slateport City; it dead-ended at a river, but that was nothing for her to worry about. Once across, all she needed to do was journey straight south to Littleroot Town and the license she could obtain there.

The second route seemed the most optimal in her opinion... at least at first. There were several problems that Yukari would have to deal with, though; first, there were plenty of areas along the route where wild Pokémon and the battle-obsessed could ambush her. Much of it could be skipped via a secondary road, but that led to the second problem: it could only be accessed if she owned a bicycle.

And she, who had lived for who-knows-how-many centuries, watched humanity for ages, accumulated wisdom and experience that few beings alive could hope to match, did what she pleased and went wherever she wanted, had never learned how to ride one.

Yukari picked at the remains of her breakfast, irritated at this lack of foresight. Sure, she had no way of knowing that it would come to something like this, but still... *I guess there's no putting it off any longer. I'll have to see if someone in Mauville is willing to teach me.* She noticed Nurse Joy going about her business behind the counter, and she raised her hand to interrupt her. "Excuse me?"

"Yes?" Joy asked, turning to her. She took note of Yukari's grumpy face. "Is something wrong?"

"Nothing *wrong* , really. I'm just wondering if you know of any good bicycle shops here in town..."

-GAP-

Merril Elliott was the curious and inquisitive sort. Never satisfied to leave things be even at the best of times, she had found herself wondering about that woman who had effectively curbstomped the entire gang without showing any signs of awareness.

The defeat hadn't sat right with her, but it wasn't the ease with which it had been done; it was the complete improbability of it. The odds of pulling off a victory in those conditions were astronomical to begin with. Aside from not using any Pokémon, the woman didn't even have the muscle mass that the average trainer possessed from travelling. The strength shown in that fight would've needed to be equal to that of the average body-builder... no, *greater.*

Staring up at her bedroom ceiling, Merril wondered what to do. She had wanted from a young age to travel Hoenn like everyone else, battling trainers and becoming number one... every kid's dream. There was just one problem with that: her older sister was *extremely* protective of her. If she set foot outside Mauville, Lindsey- - -the original Violet Vigoroth, and the leader of said gang- - -would know all about it and chase after her. Merril would get dragged back and be subjected to a drawn-out lecture, like "UV rays are bad for you!" or "You don't need to travel; you're fine where you are!"

Merril pouted as she thought about this, idly reaching over to scratch the back of her Slakoth's head. The lazy-bones Pokémon, true to form, was relaxing peacefully. *So I can't deal with strong sunlight too well. Big deal. That doesn't mean I'm weak. I was able to get that badge from the Mauville gym leader, no problem. Why can't she just let me take an umbrella or something? Isn't that why they were invented in the first place, to deal with sunshine?*

...Fine. If she won't let me leave, I've got no choice. Plan B it is.

Getting up from her bed, Merril went to her desk and pulled out a laptop. After switching it on she waited impatiently for it to finish

booting up, then quickly got to work. *Now then... let's see what the all-powerful Internet can tell me. Just who* is *this woman?*

-GAP-

"You're serious?"

"Technically I'm Yukari, but yes."

The local bike shop's owner, known to everyone as Rydel (last name unknown), was frowning as he mulled over Yukari's words. He seemed a nice enough man, if a bit intimidating at first. "Hard as it is to believe, you're the first person I've met who has ever admitted to not knowing how to ride a bicycle. Most of my costumers just buy one, then learn on the go."

"And the rest of them?" Yukari asked.

"The rest of them don't."

Yukari sniffed, letting the barest traces of haughtiness enter her tone. "Huh... must not be very brave individuals, then." She gestured at the shop's expanse; the place was bigger than it looked from the outside, and housed about a hundred different bikes of assorted types and colors in addition to repair kits and supplies. *Just how many people does he have working for him?* "So... to start off, I'll need one that'll get me to where I'm going *quickly.* I'm a bit rushed. *"*

"Quickly?"

"Quickly. As in 'hopping mad Electrode' quickly. As in 'Ninjask on coffee' quickly. You get what I mean, correct?"

Rydel nodded, smiled, and rubbed his hands together. "You'll be wanting one of my Mach Bikes, then. A bit difficult to control, but on straight paths it will eat up the kilometers quickly. Best of all, it can be folded up for easy storage." His smile wavered. "Of course, since you haven't learned how to ride one yet..."

"I'll figure it out on the fly," Yukari decided. "Staying upright on those things can't be *too* difficult."

"Hmm... well, alright." Rydel scratched his chin. "Though from the looks of your pockets, it doesn't look like you're carrying much cash..."

"..."

"Don't give me that disgruntled look, miss. You're not as bad off as you think you are. Let me make a deal with you."

Yukari's eyes met those of Rydel's. "What kind of deal?"

"Virtually all of my advertising is done either through word of mouth, or by having the occasional visitor spread the word around Hoenn. I haven't had as many costumers in the past few months, so if you're willing to take that bicycle on a trip, I'll let you take it free of charge."

"Under the circumstances, Mr. Rydel, I can't really refuse. I'll do it."

It was ten minutes later that Yukari walked out the door, wheeling her chosen Mach Bike along. The bicycle had been designed for full-grown people in mind, and it looked remarkably sturdy (although she was warned that the bike would not be able to stand up to electric attacks). In contrast to her violet-white color scheme, the bike was red and black instead. *Yami Reimu: Revenge of the Miko, now in theaters... ah, funny,* she thought, amused.

Reaching a north-south street that looked like it led out of Mauville, Yukari put her parasol inside her pack and seated herself on the vehicle. *Alright... Rydel was nice enough to tell me that unless I'm trying too hard, the bicycle's not going to just fall over while I'm still on it. Just stay calm, don't grandstand, and pedal. The rest will take care of itself. Easy now, easy...*

Gripping the bike's handlebars, she followed those mental instructions.

-GAP-

A young boy and his father, residents of Mauville, looked out their apartment window as a flock of birds was witnessed taking flight outside the city.

"Papa?"

"Yes, Jeff?"

"Why are all those Taillow flying around? Did something scare them?"

"Maybe an amateur bicyclist lost control of her bike and forged her own path through Hoenn, crashing through everything in her way and creating a new route for future trainers to follow?"

"...You don't have to tell me if you don't know, papa."

"Thank you, Jeff."

-GAP-

Rustboro City. Home of the Devon Corporation, the Gym Leader Roxanne, the Trainer's School... and the librarian Amber Harrison: a legend in her own mind.

A little more than ten years ago, she was no egotist: she was just a pretty black-haired Unova-born trainer who'd had enough of the travelling life and settled down in Rustboro. She was highly intelligent, liked kids and had a thing for organization, so she was asked to take charge of the library when the position became available. The two-story building was a stone's throw from the Trainer's School, so the facility saw a lot of traffic. Amber passed her days helping children, and had later recommended that Roxanne

should aim to become a Gym Leader when she was shown to have the right attitude.

But as Bill Cosby once put it, "my wife and I were intellectuals... before we had children." After Amber became a librarian, she married and had kids of her own. **Quadruplets** . For a decade she was run ragged as the couple struggled to raise them and rein in their mischievous impulses; some people swore that her *skin* was turning gray instead of her hair, and it was rare to see her without an exhausted look on her face. Finally three of the kids set out to become trainers together, easing her burden and giving her the chance to slowly recover from the increasing stress. Amber called herself a survivor, telling her tales to anyone who would listen and taking pride in her motherhood. Those with children sympathized with her, but most everyone else just called her annoying. It took weeks before she was finally convinced to shut up.

For reasons unknown even to her parents, the fourth child- - -named 'Ellen', after Amber's own mother- - -showed no inclination of wanting to leave Rustboro as she approached (and then passed) the 10-year mark. She spoke very little, if at all, and before doing so she always waited a few seconds before saying what was on her mind. She had a very cynical view of the world, and never felt as if it was worth going out in.

Instead of finding friends and playing with them, Ellen instead sequestered herself either in her home or at the library, seeming deadset on reading everything that was available whether she understood it or not. She liked swimming (so long as her father's Swampert was there to keep an eye on her) and she kept a small garden behind her home, so it wasn't as if she was physically weak for her age, but aside from that she spent little time outdoors. Most people found her cold to be around, having trouble looking into her half-closed eyes as they talked to her, and they tried to stay away from her when they could. Only Roxanne, Amber's parents, and a select few others could put up with her for long.

At the same time Yukari was talking to Rydel, Rustboro's library had just opened for the morning. An assortment of middle-aged people were sitting around, reading newspapers from around Hoenn. Roxanne, with the aid of a Geodude, was gathering research materials for a class that she was going to assist with that day. Ellen was sitting at the table closest to the front desk, a stack of books on astronomy before her as she decided which one to read first.

Having just finished cataloguing some new additions to the library, Amber sat down at the front desk and sighed quietly. Ellen's eyes flicked in her direction. "...Something wrong, mother?" she asked in a naturally soft-spoken tone.

"It's nothing, dear," Amber answered, her voice dry and just a bit raspy as she spoke at an equally low volume. Libraries *were* supposed to be peaceful, after all. "Calico's just been insufferable lately, that's all."

"...Delcatty's disappearance?"

"Yes. By all accounts it doesn't make sense, but you already know about that."

Ellen was silent for about half a minute. "...It could be another gang of thieves. ...Just because Teams Magma and Aqua have gone straight... doesn't mean that there aren't others causing trouble. Has Calico already talked to the police?"

"Twice." Amber took a sip from a previously unseen cup of coffee and smoothed out a wrinkle in the gray sweater she was wearing. "Both times they told her that while Pokémon have been reported missing, no one has been *seen,* let alone caught in the act of thievery. Officer Jenny promised to look into it."

"...I take back what I said. No offense to her or the department," Ellen said as she plucked a book about the solar system from the top of the pile, "...but I'm starting to think that this is beyond anything that

humans could carry out. ...Pokémon, maybe, but humans are just not that stealthy. They don't have the intelligence for it."

Out in Unova, Jessie, James and Meowth got the vague suspicion that they were being insulted somehow.

Amber frowned at Ellen. "Dear, you shouldn't belittle us like that... *or* yourself. You've snuck up on me *plenty* of times."

"...I was entirely unaware that I was doing so." Ellen flipped through the pages until she found a section that interested her, then settled back in her seat to read. Entirely straight-faced, she continued: "...although admittedly, it was funny watching you jump up and flail about in the air like that."

"I suppose I should punish you for having a laugh at your mother's expense," Amber warned her in a huff. "You'll be confined to your room the rest of the day. Nothing to read, and you can't go outside to swim."

"...Never once did I laugh. It's a completely unnecessary thing." Beat. "...All I said was that it was funny. Nothing more, nothing less."

Frowning, Amber turned towards Roxanne for help, but all the Gym Leader could offer was a smile and a weak, nervous laugh before she continued her methodical search. With a sigh, Amber folded her arms on the counter and rested her head there. "How did you get to be so smart? You didn't get any of that from your father. Certainly not from me."

"..." Ellen looked up from her book, staring out at nothing. "...I've often wondered..."

Amber waited for her to continue, but she never did. Deciding that the conversation was over, Ellen fully focused on her reading material and kept her mouth closed.

The librarian felt inclined to ground her for the rest of the day, but refrained from doing so. It would just cause a minor scene, and it was too nice a morning to let a snarky child put a damper on it. Instead, Amber took out a deck of cards and opted to pass the time with some Solitaire, intending to enjoy a few moments of peace before anyone needed her for something.

Shame that the tranquillity didn't last, for only a few minutes later...

"Clear a path, clear a path! I can't stop this thing! Everyone out of my way!"

Everyone on the library's ground floor practically jumped out of their seats as something ***crashed*** into the main entrance, shattering the glass on impact, forcing the door open and provoking most of those present into taking cover. Yukari and her out-of-control Mach Bike barged inside; Amber's mouth dropped open at her obvious insanity, but things were happening too quickly for her to protest. The bike crashed into the side of the front desk, catapulting Yukari out of her seat and *over* the counter. She finally came to a forceful rest, slamming back-first onto Ellen's desk and dislodging the books that were piled there. Her pack wound up on the ground amidst the chaos.

Being the closest aside from the Harrisons, Roxanne was the first to reach her; her baffled Geodude stayed close by. "Excuse me, miss? Please! Are you alright?" she cried out, alarmed.

"Can't speak," Yukari groaned, looking more frustrated than pained. "Reticulating...spine. Ouch..."

Ellen gave no sign that the situation bothered her in any way, having not budged throughout it all. "...Health and Medicine, third row from the stairs."

" *Ellen, stop being rude!"*

-GAP-

Merril jerked in surprise. As if connected by strings, her computer chair's wheels skidded and tossed her sideways onto the floor with a *whump.* She ignored this, her eyes wider than her fists as the information fully sunk into her brain.

What.

...What.

... ... ***What.***

"No. No no no no no no no," Merril muttered, shaking her head repeatedly. Jumping back to her feet, she brushed aside her scraggly bangs and edged as close to her laptop's screen as she dared. "This... this can't be right. No. It can't. She should've aged. She should've looked at least a *little* different. This just won't fly. This just won't fly!"

But it flew; reality didn't care whether Merril didn't believe it or not. Of course, considering that reality was not a physical being, that was a given. The Violet Vigoroths' resident computer geek was looking at a "Prospective Trainer" sheet that was being sent from the Mauville Pokémon Center to Professor Birch in Littleroot, courtesy of Nurse Joy. It showed a picture of the woman that had kicked the gang's collective butts; her smile would've looked pleasant on anyone else, but on her it set off sirens in Merril's mind. Amongst other stats were her age (estimated to be around 30), birthplace (some town not far from Mount Chimney), Pokémon (just a Ninetales)...

...and her listed name.

A decade ago, there was a series of articles published in a Lilycove-based magazine revolving around the life and disappearance of one Yukari Yakumo. It was a small-town sort of mystery that stymied everyone, most of all those who had been closest to her, and it continued to be a topic of conversation in Hoenn for another five years before even the local conspiracy theorists gave up on solving it; as big as it was, and as big of an Internet junkie as Merril was, it

was inevitable that she'd learn all about it sooner or later. The details were pouring back into her head even now.

Fifteen years ago, Yukari had been discovered unconscious at the foot of Mount Chimney one night. The couple who discovered her, the Laydens, had said that there was no sign of injury or illness; not taking any chances, they brought her back to their home and looked after her until she woke up. Upon awakening she seemed mildly curious at her surroundings, but took her whereabouts in stride. She then seemed caught off guard, first by something that she refused to talk about, and then by the presence of Kevin's long-time companion Linoone; she was on record as saying that she "had never seen a Pokémon before", which most (read: *all)* people thought was a lie, and she was wary of them at first. Several decades old at *least,* and she had never seen one? Had she been hiding beneath a boulder all her life?

Whether it was considered a lie or not, over the course of that first month her entire attitude changed. One description of Yukari said that she possessed the sort of wonder that a rookie trainer had upon truly seeing the world around her for the first time. She had become increasingly fond of the Laydens, spending most of her free time with them. Whenever she wasn't working with them, she was either walking the paths immediately outside the town or conversing with the locals about life and Pokémon.

One citizen swore that he once saw her *standing atop a lamppost* one evening *,* staring eastward towards the far-off forests and positively aglow with happiness and satisfaction; when he questioned her, she said: "Such good-natured behavior... such cooperation and spirit... I wonder: what sort of world has allowed these circumstances, for them both to permit the residence of monsters in their personal paradise?... What sort of lives have their ancestors led, to allow a time when the normal and the special would unite this way?... Wherever I look, whether at nature or at civilization, this land is beautiful... fantastically so, and it is far more valuable than all the treasures and artifacts of the world. I shall sear these

sights into my mind and heart so that I do not forget the time I've spent here. Both races should be proud, for they have accomplished something impossible: they have gained the approval of the ageless." When asked what she was talking about, she smiled but said nothing further.

As positive as Yukari's comments were, they were seen as the second sign that she was not everything she appeared to be. The articles talked about her being joined by a Vulpix, and the time she'd spent training it. Finally one day, with only the little fox bearing witness to it, she just plain and utterly **disappeared.**

Everyone feared the worst when said disappearance was discovered. Foul play? Abduction by a misguided Pokémon? Some joke gone entirely wrong? Some combination of the three? No one could say; only Vulpix really knew, and she could not express her views in terms that people could understand. While the Laydens expressed concern for her safety, wherever she was, Vulpix was out of her head with worry; it took much convincing from the head of the household before she could bring herself to eat. In the meantime, the town and much of the surrounding area was scoured for clues as to her whereabouts, but with no success.

Days, weeks, *months* went by one after another. There was no word from anyone that Yukari had turned up anywhere, and gradually the citizens came to accept that wherever she went, she was gone for good. Life went on, disregarding those travelers and overly curious investigators who wouldn't let the matter rest. Those people would be told the story about the mysterious lady, and they would speculate as to why she was so secretive and why she left when she did. No one would really know the truth.

Until now!

There was no denying it: she was back. Why and how, Merril didn't know, but there was something about the possibility of hearing those experiences first-hand that got her blood pumping. Underlying it all was caution: Yukari was *not* to be trifled with, if the gang's beatdown

had proved anything. As the saying went, with her there was more than met the eye.

Merril's tremendous smile took up nearly half her face... that which could be seen, anyway. *As if I'd let something like that stop me! Forget that, forget my lupus, forget the sunlight. I'm* ***going!*** She turned towards her bedroom door and shouted: "Lindseyyyy! Lindsey, *yo!* Get up here, now! You gotta see this!"

"Huh..."

A red and white sphere sat on the banks of Misty Lake. Daylight shined down on its metallic surface, illuminating it before the eyes of Gensokyo's most well-known (and most annoying, to some) fairy. She sat down on the cold ground, not minding the temperature one bit.

"Wowww..."

Another fairy, better known by the name others gave her than the one she gave herself, joined her friend and stared at the sphere in awe. "It's very pretty, Cirno."

"Yeah." The ice fairy picked up the sphere and took a closer look, barely noticing the thin layer of frost that had formed on contact. "It's red and white. You think it belongs to the miko?"

Daiyousei thought about this for all of two seconds. "I don't know. I've never seen it before."

"...I say we keep it." Cirno looked up at Dai, teeth gleaming as she smiled. "If it's hers, she goes nuts trying to find it. If it's not, we can keep it as a toy. Either way, we win!"

"Shouldn't we find out what's in it before we steal it?" Dai suggested.

Cirno gave her a confused look. "What's in it? Isn't it just a metal ball?"

"Look at it, look at it."

Cirno did so, but she still didn't get it at first. It took about fifteen seconds before an honest-to-goodness intelligent thought formed in her brain. "Hey, maybe there's a treasure in here or something."

"But what would we do with it?" Dai lifted off, slowly circling around. Eagerly yet curiously, she appended: "What kind of treasure would fit in there?"

"We'll get to that later. Now help me get this open, would you?"

Their subsequent efforts to try and open the sphere weren't successful. Dai tried prying it open with a dagger bullet... but nothing. Cirno tried the same thing, but her much larger ice sword had next to no leverage to work with. It didn't stop her from making additional attempts in doing so, resorting to splitting it open when things didn't pan out. That didn't work out either, as the metal was somewhat tougher than any non-magical craftsmanship the little fairies had ever encountered.

After twenty minutes Cirno finally flung the sphere to the ground, fed up. "That's it," she decided. "We were going to do this the easy way, and now it wants to do this the hard way!"

"What's the hard way?" Dai asked, sure that she knew the answer already.

She was right. "I'm going to attack it and yell at it until it gives in." Cirno calmed down enough to explain this to her friend. "Don't tell me you didn't know that already. I thought all fairies did."

Only because we don't know any better! Dai wanted to say. What she heard herself saying was: "Alright. Give it what for, okay?", as

she got out of Cirno's path.

The Ice Fairy's wonderful brain swerved onto a new train of thought, completely missing the ol' 5:15 and making the other passengers complain. Her face scrunched up as she tried to make sense of what was spoken. "'Give it what for'? What does that mean?"

"I don't know," Daiyousei confessed. "I overheard a villager say that once while he was fishing. It sounded appropriate."

"How do you figure?"

Dai thought back to that sight she'd seen, trying hard to remember. It strained the limits of her childlike memory, but remember she did. "There was this funny man, and he was having trouble catching fish at the river. ...I think he was muttering that to himself. The next time I saw him, he was bringing a dozen fish back to the village. Maybe it's a blessing?"

"Wow." Cirno looked down at the sphere, smiling. "Neat. So do you want me to give it what for?"

Dai nodded, fists held close to her. "Yes. Do it. Give it what for!"

A nod. "Count on it!"

Cirno backed up a half-dozen meters, preparing herself for what she was about to do. Eyes flicked from one side to another; aside from her and Dai, there was no one present. She took a breath, let it out...

...and charged ahead, flying low to the ground. When she got close enough, she swerved and brought one leg across at an angle. Her teeth gritted, she exclaimed: "Would you just..." Her foot connected with the sphere, kicking it against a nearby rock. " - - -*OPEN* already?!"

The sphere bounced off the rock and the ground once each, then obligingly obeyed the Ice Fairy's command.

If Aya had been around, she would have recorded Cirno and Daiyousei's surprised looks for posterity (*It worked on the first try?!* had crossed both their minds in that instant). As it was, only the metal orb witnessed it. It split in half down the middle, popping open and spitting out a wave of red light. "Don't look at it!" Daiyousei shrieked, warping within the branches of the nearest tree. Cirno flew straight up, intending to dodge what could only be an attack...

...And stopped, pleasantly surprised when the red light took shape on the ground, forming an amphibian and bringing it to life. The light faded, and the sphere resealed itself.

"Croa... Croa..."

Cirno turned and gestured at Daiyousei. "It's okay, Dai. It's just a frog. A really ugly frog."

Daiyousei flew out of cover, and the two of them slowly descended towards the ground. She would've been disappointed that there wasn't any treasure inside if she hadn't been distracted by the novelty of what had just occurred. "Do frogs even come in blue?"

"Croa... Croa..."

After a moment's thought Cirno flew in a wide circle around the frog, examining it. "Those circles on its face make it look creepy."

"Croa... Croa..."

"And it looks like there's white paint on its belly," Daiyousei added. "...And it has hands. Are frogs supposed to have hands?"

"Croa... Croa..."

The frog wasn't paying attention to them, doing little more than sitting on the ground and croaking. Cirno wondered why she was feeling a

trifle scared, then lost her fear altogether. "Who cares? It's just a frog. And you know what that means."

Dai hung her head and sighed. "You're going to freeze it, aren't you?"

Cirno actually looked befuddled at this. "What else would I want to do with a frog? Make it croak different kinds of sake?"

"Croa... Croa..."

"What does sake have to do with this?" Dai protested, knee-deep in confusion. "I didn't drink too much! I don't want to get frozen!"

"What kind of silly thought is that?" Cirno flew over to the frog, an icy mist gathering around one hand. "It's not you I'm freezing; it's the frog! Now, watch this!" She brought her hand down towards the frog's head...

"- - -GHAACK!"

It never got there. Quick as lightning, a purple-tipped hand snaked in and jabbed Cirno's gut, stopping her in her tracks. The frog backed off two steps, watching as the ice fairy doubled over in mid-air, then lowered its hand and continued to look on passively. "Croa... Croa... Croa..."

" *Cirno!"* Daiyousei flew over, her wings fluttering madly as she helped her friend upright. "What happened? Are you okay? C'mon, c'mon, speak up already!"

"Ooof..." Cirno raised her head, glaring at the frog venomously; fitting, considering she suddenly felt rather... under the weather. "Ugly frogs hit hard... no fair, hitting me when I wasn't looking!"

"Cirno, you *were* looking," Daiyousei reminded her, sweatdropping and wondering how long she could support the ice fairy without her hands getting frostbitten.

"I was looking at the face, not the fist," Cirno countered as she struggled to free herself, incensed. "C'mon, Dai, let me go! There's going to be blustery vengeance in the woods tonight!"

Cirno was reasonably smart and strong as far as fairies went, like Shiki had once said, but when it came to taking things into consideration her entire species was sorely lacking. The frog's strike had poisoned her, venom seeping through her systems and steadily draining her willpower. Her reflexes and reactions were working against her as she fought the urge to lay down somewhere.

Also, her unawareness of this notwithstanding, the different styles and rules of combat that the two combatants were used to had clashed horribly. The idea of youkai and such from different worlds existing had never been in Reimu's mind when she created the Spell Card system. It thus failed to take into account the network of strengths and weaknesses that the Pokémon types possessed. Cirno, having an affinity with ice, was accordingly placed in an unenviable position:

...That of being doubly weak against tremendous physical attacks.

Wrenching herself free from Daiyousei's grip and ignoring her friend's surprised cry, Cirno leapt straight up into the air as the temperature around her dropped sharply. With a yell of *"Super Ice Kick!"* , announcing her intention to enter a Spell Card duel with this creature, she spun furiously and plummeted with one foot extended...

...Only to miss entirely, instead freezing over seven square meters worth of land as her target leapt clear from ground zero. Recovering from the dizziness brought on by the spinning, Cirno looked up...

"Croa..."

...And was greeted by the frog as it dropped towards her from above. Its right hand was shining white as it swung in a downwards arc straight at her face.

" *...gunnnk!"*

" *YEEEEK- - -"*

Her panicked screech was cut off as the frog's brick-breaking smash was delivered to her front door, the shipping costs prepaid and its strength far out of proportion to the amphibian's size. Cirno rebounded off the ground, splintering some of the ice beneath her, and flipped end over end a half dozen times before finally hitting the ground back-first. Just as quickly as the fight had begun, it was over.

"Wah...! Cirno!"

Daiyousei dived in, anxious to help her friend, but slowed down when the frog pinned her with a dreadful stare. "P-please," she stuttered. "I don't w-want to fight y-you. Can... c-can I please help my friend if we p-promise to leave you alone?"

The frog's gaze remained locked on hers for the better part of fifteen seconds; the only sounds were the odd birdsong and that spooky croaking. When the frog finally tired of staring at her, it tucked the metal sphere under its arm and walked off sedately without any fear of being broadsided, perhaps knowing that Daiyousei was too unnerved to attempt a sneak attack in retaliation.

"Owwww," Cirno groaned as she sat up, her hand on her forehead. "What hit me? Where did it go?"

"Can we talk later?" Daiyousei asked as she helped Cirno upright. "I need to go home before that thing comes back."

"...Well, okay. I'm feeling kind of awful anyway... Bet you never thought I'd say *that,* huh?... Let me go, Dai. I can fly fine. It's my head that hurts, not my wings."

The greater fairy released her. "If you say so..." Daiyousei turned and flew off a few feet, then paused. "And could you try not to pick any fights between now and tomorrow?"

Cirno pouted. "You act like I get into fights all the time..."

"But you do! ...Or at least that's what it feels like."

"...Just go home, Dai. I'll see you tomorrow."

With obvious reluctance, Daiyousei waved good-bye and flew off towards home; dragging herself through the air, Cirno did the same. "I'll be alright," she told herself. "I'll be alright, I'll be alright. No violent frog gets the best of the strangest! ... Strangest? No, that's not it... oh, never mind!"

"Croa... croa..."

Croagunk stood before Misty Lake, taking a few minutes to examine his reflection. It was a rather eventful day, at least by the poison frog Pokémon's standards, and he wanted to spend the remaining time quietly.

A shadow swam beneath the Lake's surface. Focusing on it before it disappeared, Croagunk noted that it was a very pretty woman. Or perhaps it was a fish? Or maybe a woman in a half-fish costume? ...Whatever she was, she still could've made any man go bananas just by introducing herself. This inevitably caused a question to form in Croagunk's mind:

How did I get separated from that skirt-chasing trainer of mine, anyway?

Lugia's moveset: Hydro Pump, Rain Dance, Aeroblast, Recover

Approximate Level: 82

Kanako's Notes: The old command "Be careful what you wish for; you might get it" has struck home once again. I had wished that we could somehow use the Pokémon for our benefit, and one of the

strongest of them has made its home right in our backyard. From what it told us and how it behaved- - -wait a few moments. Yakumo's servant has landed nearby. She should know something about this.

Croagunk's moveset: Poison Jab, Poison Sting, Brick Break

Approximate Level: ?

Cirno's Notes: Did I eat something bad for fairies? Am I imagining this? I've been punched by Marisa and the Hakurei maiden often enough, and it's never hurt this much. That must mean that the frog's stronger than they are! Ah-hahahaha! ... Who am I kidding? I'm going to try again to freeze it someday. It wouldn't be me if I didn't, right?

Patchouli, Utsuho

MONSTERS IN PARADISE

Chapter Six

By: Curtis Wildcat

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Brace yourselves for some confusion fu.

Finding *The Lion King* reference gets you some chocolate cake.

The last few days had been restless ones for Patchouli. Following her initial meeting with Akyuu, she'd been testing Skarmory's strengths and weaknesses, its attacks and defenses, and cataloguing anything of note that she could find. It was fun and exciting for her to learn things about these visitors to Gensokyo, although one couldn't tell by looking at her face.

She'd learned that Skarmory's ridiculous defenses had their limits. Any attack- - -at least those that were not governed by the Spell Card system- - -that was expressly intended to defeat it in a single hit would not succeed, as the bird still had enough in it to fight on; anything after that would KO it (while attacks that would defeat *anything* in one strike were ignored altogether). An abundance of minor attacks would demolish it, as Marisa and Sakuya had already demonstrated. And- - -this was the big one- - -Skarmory had recoiled and flew off into the library's depths when Patchouli triggered her *Fire Sign: Agni Shine* spell card; it utterly *refused* to have anything to do with fire. *I'll list that as it's major weak point until something else comes up.*

Helping Skarmory recover from these tests was easier than expected. While collecting what vegetables she could from the garden, as it wouldn't be too much longer before cold weather started to set in, Sakuya had found some out-of-season fruit growing on one of the trees. When she tried one, she had discerned them to be horrendously spicy and too much for her taste buds to take. On the other hand, Skarmory loved them: eating just a few of them helped it to regain its strength swiftly and miraculously, and after a bit of rest it was ready to go again. Koakuma had found this to be nothing short of amazing.

To a lesser degree, the rooster that the Mansion's residents now knew as Blaziken had also been subjected to some tests. It was quickly established that Blaziken did not like water, as he always stayed as far away from Misty Lake as possible whenever he fought. He was especially wary of attacks coming from the air, and he seemed to have been hurt more than he should have been by one of Meiling's earthshaking Yellow Quake Kicks. He too relied on food to keep himself at full strength, having a preference for sweet things (as Sakuya discovered firsthand when a snack intended for Remilia went missing).

But just like Skarmory's armor only being so strong, Patchouli could only take so much excitement. Conducting the tests, or really *any* sort of prolonged exertion, quickly tired her out. Finally deciding that enough was enough, she set her research materials aside and decided to rest for a while. The Pokémon weren't so important that she couldn't allow herself some breaks.

At the back of the area set aside for Patchouli's study were two bookcases facing each other, much smaller than the rest of those in the library but still twice as tall as she was. On their shelves were, not magical tomes of eldritch lore, but some of the finest literary works in the world that had her stamp of approval. *Anne of Green Gables. The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (which Remilia insisted was loosely based on a true story). *The Canterbury Tales.* The collected

works of William Shakespeare ... and the list went on. Many of them had been gathered by Patchouli before the Mansion was transferred to Gensokyo, while still others had been in the hands of Kourindou's owner at some point or another afterward.

Sitting parallel to the bookshelves and perfectly aligned between them was a velvety cushioned couch, soft enough that a person could melt into it just by sitting down; to the side of it was a small polished wooden stand, perfect for snack placement. After selecting her reading material and setting aside her cap, Patchouli laid down on the couch and set her head against one of the armrests. She closed her eyes for just a moment, savoring the comfort that the couch offered, then flipped past the first few pages of the book and began reading. In her mind's eye, people and places from an unknown land took form...

She wasn't sure how long she had been reading when she felt a slight chill creeping over her. Bringing herself back to the here and now, Patchouli could hear the distant rumble of the library's door closing. *Someone must have entered a few moments ago... Remi, probably. Well, she's just going to have to wait a little while.* She started to call for Koakuma, but paused when she remembered that her assistant had taken up her work where she had left off. "Oh, bother... Sakuya?" she said aloud, signalling for the Perfect Maid. "A blanket, if you please?"

There was no vocal response, but only a few seconds later she felt the warmth of a woolen blanket covering her from her ankles to her elbows. Patchouli wondered why the maid hadn't greeted her, but decided it didn't matter. *Sakuya's been fairly busy recently, just like the rest of us. It shouldn't be surprising that she wants to get everything done as quickly as possible.* She sighed and continued to read silently. *For all that I mock her and Meiling for their inability to keep Marisa away, Remi did a good thing by offering her employment here. I'll have to speak with my friend later and*

convince her to let Sakuya have a day off, give her a chance to recover.

A few more short minutes passed. Patchouli yawned quietly, then grimaced when she realized it. *I'm feeling a bit tired, but I'm not ready to put this down just yet. I need a quick fix.* "Sakuya?" she called. "Some tea and chocolate, please."

It was the work of only a minute before a teacup and a saucer- - -a little block of chocolate on the latter- - -turned up on the stand. Patchouli took a sip of tea, finding it tasteful and lovely. "Ah. Thank you, Sakuya."

"For what?" the maid's voice asked.

"...!"

Patchouli looked up and to her left over the back of the couch. Sakuya was standing there, another teacup in her hand as she wiped it off with a cloth. "What are you thanking me for? I haven't done anything for you yet today."

"Explain this, then." Patchouli gestured first at the blanket, then at the tea and chocolate. "I called for you and asked you for these things, and you brought them. What's so hard to remember about that?"

Sakuya frowned. "I did not hear you, so I do not recall ever doing that for you. I've been waiting on my lady for the last fifteen minutes. ...And speaking of which, she's been sitting at your desk wanting to speak with you."

"Tell her that she'd better get a deck of cards and start a game of rummy with Koakuma. I'm trying to rest." This didn't make sense. Who was it that had gotten her the things she'd wanted? "...Never mind. *Koakuma!"* Patchouli barked.

Her assistant was quick to respond, flying over the bookcases seconds later. She alighted next to Sakuya and bowed. "Yes, Lady Patchouli? What is it?"

"I need the both of you to check the area. We have a visitor here, and there's a good chance that it's up to some mischief."

The two of them became fully alert, although in Sakuya's case it looked like she'd been close to putting things together. Accepting the order, the two of them began their search. They checked around the bookcases, *in* the bookcases and over them, around the magical light just overhead...

"Found it," Sakuya finally announced. She and Koakuma were both on their knees, checking beneath the couch. "There's something alive down here, but it's too shrouded in shadow for us to tell what it is. Should we get it out, Lady Patchouli?"

"Please do."

Koakuma nodded and reached under the couch with both hands, but this accomplished nothing. *"OW!"* she yelped as she hastily withdrew them, wincing as she found the red marks at the tip of one of her fingers. "The thing bit me!"

Sakuya took a brief moment to examine the wound. "It doesn't seem too serious, but maybe you ought to get that treated just in case."

Patchouli didn't want to leave the comfort of the couch, but she supposed that if she wanted to get this over with so she could get back to her reading, she'd have to get clever. "You go and take care of that," she told them as she sat up, setting the book down and gathering the blanket around her. "There's something I'd like to try." She lowered her voice to a whisper and added: "Sakuya, if you hear me call for you, don't answer."

The others wondered about this, but they agreed. A second later they were gone, carried away by the Perfect Maid and her time

mastery.

Patchouli waited a few more minutes before putting her idea to the test. Simple in form and execution it was, and it stood a good chance of working. Shifting over to the other end of the couch, she said aloud: "Sakuya? May I have my hat, please?"

Now that she was fully focused on something other than her book, Patchouli could detect some quiet shuffling and a vaguely feminine voice murmuring incomprehensibly to itself. Something grunted, and a flash of green and yellow swiped her cap from its resting place; the librarian narrowed her eyes, but waited...

And a moment later, she felt a very slight weight on her head as her cap was placed there. Before any other actions could be made, the librarian spoke sharply: "Sakuya, *stay* . Why are you hiding from me?"

"...Swa?" came a questioning voice. There was no mistaking the surprise with this one.

"We will not keep any secrets." *Not anymore,* Patchouli amended, remembering Flandre. "I do not doubt your willingness to help, but I do not wish to be served by a shadow. There's no need to hide what we are. Not in the Scarlet Devil Mansion."

Roughly ten seconds of silence passed by as whatever it was mulled over this, which Patchouli figured was enough time. She patted the cushion next to her. "Now get down here, please. Let me get a good look at you."

" *Looooooon..."* that weird something crooned, and she felt the cushions move as the creature landed next to her.

Patchouli looked down at it, taking in every detail of its appearance. The creature was unquestionably another Pokémon; most youkai that she knew of didn't have this kind of guise. *It has its own name already, so it probably belonged to someone else before it came*

here. There's a strange coincidence in that it too is called Sakuya, and it has the marks of a capable assistant. You wouldn't expect this out of a creature of this size. She cupped her chin with one hand, frowning. *And there's something familiar about how it's staring at me- - -...*

Time shifted as Sakuya and Koakuma appeared nearby, interrupting Patchouli's thought process; the maid's task had been completed. Koakuma screeched in delight, clasping her hands before her; Patchouli silently noticed that her bitten finger had been treated, then lightly bandaged. "Look at it, look at it!" her assistant squealed, eyes on the Pokémon. "It looks just like you! It's *adorable!"*

"I concur." Sakuya couldn't help but smile pleasantly at this as she retrieved the teacup she'd been wiping off earlier. "How fitting it is. What do you think of it, Lady Patchouli?"

And for all that it was a yellow bug thing covered in a leafy blanket, with not a trace of purple or lavender anywhere, the resemblance between the librarian and the Pokémon was uncanny. Looking at that tired face and perpetual frown was like staring at her own reflection.

Patchouli's eye twitched when she realized this. "Anyone who thinks this is funny shall suffer," she hissed. " *Forever* ."

Somewhere in space and time, a fat guy with glasses and a Detroit Tigers T-shirt felt an unexplained chill.

The new presence in the library didn't go unnoticed by the mansion's mistress for long.

Remilia disliked having to wait for long periods, as she tended to do strange things when she was bored. So it was with reluctance that Patchouli finally went to her desk to see what she wanted. 'Swadloon', which Koakuma figured was probably the Pokémon's

species name, had decided that the best way to travel would be on top of Patchouli's head. This led to a problem: as light as Swadloon was, the librarian still wasn't willing to bear the weight for long. The creature wouldn't let Koakuma carry it for some reason, and it was rather leery of Sakuya's knife holsters, so Patchouli was left with no alternative: with the aid of a small stone, she cast a simple spell on the bug that temporarily reduced its weight by half, making the situation more endurable for the time being.

Of course, this still meant that it was a pillar of grumpiness that arrived at Patchouli's desk. And it was said pillar that got Remilia sniggering and giggling.

"Eh-hee... eh-hee-hee... eh-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee..."

Patchouli glared at her best friend. "It is *not funny,* Remi."

Remilia clapped her hands over her mouth, but the laughter could *not* be contained. " *Eh-HAHA* ***HAH*** *-HAHAHA HEEEE...OH-HOHOHOHOHO...!"*

This could not go unpunished. Patchouli whipped a Spell Card out of her sleeve and slammed it onto her desk. *"Earth Metal Sign: Emerald Megalopolis!"*

The laughter was cut off as a set of jeweled pillars erupted from the ground around Patchouli, one of them uppercutting Remilia's chin and slugging her ceilingward; Swadloon's jaw dropped open as it witnessed this, while the others decided that the whole thing was facepalm-worthy.

Thirty feet overhead, Remilia righted herself and decided: 'Hey, if she wanted to fight, she should've just said so'. Spawning four cloud-like familiars around herself, she rained bullets of all sizes down onto the stationary Patchouli and the emerald shields. They didn't break apart under the assault, but they did recede into the ground after a short period of time and necessitated evasive action on Patchouli's part.

As the librarian grazed a group of bat-shaped bullets, she rolled her eyes at the cringing Swadloon. "You know, any time that you wanted to jump off would be a good one. I need all the speed I can muster."

"Swa," the leafy bug told her nervously, hunkering down instead of preparing itself to jump. "Swad-looooon."

"...Don't want to get off, huh? Well, have it your way," Patchouli warned. "Just remember that Remilia's going to start playing mean in a few moments-"

"Destiny: Miserable Fate!"

She was cut off as Remilia's scarlet aura burned to life around her and flung itself towards Patchouli in the form of a multitude of chains. "Okay, so I guess my estimation was off," she admitted, her flight pattern becoming increasingly erratic as she tried to dodge all of the chains, some of which were homing in on her position. *I'm feeling about as well as I'll ever get, so I'd say that rest did me some good... maybe now's a good time to test that new Spell Card I've been working on...?*

That thought was as far as Patchouli got before she was distracted by something inconsequential. The jittery Swadloon, frightened by the sight of Remilia's attack, decided that perhaps getting herself clear of the duel was a good idea after all. It rolled off Patchouli's head and to the left, spitting a stringy substance akin to spider silk at the nearest bookshelf and swinging towards it.

By coincidence, the String Shot's threads were pierced by one of the danmaku chains, causing Swadloon to swing off course and fall. Panicking, it spat out more string to try and stabilize itself before it hit the ground, aiming at the closest object that wasn't a bookshelf.

Said object...

"GU-WAH! What the- - -?!"

...was Remilia's face.

Two of the three onlookers watched with bemusement as the Mansion's mistress stopped her barrage to try and remove the sticky stuff from her face. Red claws formed on her fingertips as she carved it all away. By then, Swadloon had been able to land safely on a shelf near the floor; the little Pokémon turned to see what the racket was all about, but found itself unimpressed by what it had caused.

Remilia shook her head as she finished, her vision no longer obscured. Seeing no bullets flying at her, she planted her hands on her hips and huffed: "First you don't want to get involved, and then you do. Make up your mind- - -"

She felt something papery press against her back between her wings, and she froze up. "It was not the creature's choice," Patchouli's voice quietly uttered from behind her. "But I digress. Everything you say and do in my library, whether it involves complaints or laughter, I will hold you accountable for. *Water Sign: Newton's Wave Cannon."*

Even as Remilia could be heard screeching "Newton's Wave **WHAT?!"** , the entire world turned a deep blue.

"Aah...aah...aaah- *choo!"* Sniff. "Ugh. Why, Pache, *why?* "

Patchouli had no answer, staring down at the floor and feeling a slight hint of shame. From its place on her head, Swadloon had regained its disinterested stare in the aftermath of all the excitement earlier. Standing next to Remilia's bed, caring for her drastically weakened mistress, Sakuya had an expression that flickered between respect and tranquil fury.

"Why?" Remilia repeated. "I thought *Marisa* was the thief." She tried again to sit up, but she couldn't do so much as prop herself onto her arms. She gave up, resting her head against her pillows. "What on

earth possessed you to create a water-element ripoff of the ever-loving *Master Spark?* Aaah- ***choo!*** ... Excuse me."

"...I've been experimenting with some new Spell Cards since before the Pokémon arrived," Patchouli admitted, shoulders sagging; Newton's Wave Cannon had taken about as much out of her as Royal Flare usually did. "You and Sakuya both have Last Words to call your own. I decided it was high time I began work on one for myself."

"Strong as it is," Remilia commented, sniffing, "I get the feeling that it isn't what you wanted. Spell Cards are supposed to be elegant and pretty, after all."

Patchouli nodded a fraction. "You'd be right. Aside from this one, I already have Royal Flare and Silent Selene...that makes water, sun, and moon. Once I've gotten a look at the other four cards, I'll combine their best qualities into one. At that point I'll have to decide whether I should continue to use them or just leave them in my personal album."

Sakuya's face lost some of its fury. "It would be a truly dire situation for you to use such a Card to start with, wouldn't it?"

"..."

For someone whose most prominent weakness after sunlight had been exploited by her best friend, Remilia was remarkably concerned. "She's right, Pache. We ultimately don't mean any serious harm when we utilize danmaku. If your higher-tier cards already leave you very tired, what would that say about your Last Word?"

"..." Patchouli slowly nodded, closing her eyes. "Please forgive me, Remi. I got a bit carried away when you began laughing at us- - -" She opened her eyes as the weight on her head jumped off of it. "Huh?"

With a 'plop', Swadloon landed on Remilia's bed. Digging beneath the covers a bit, it gently dragged her hand out from there as the others looked on in confusion. Then, utilizing a bit of String Shot, it tugged Patchouli closer to the bed and placed her hand over Remilia's. That action done, it relinquished its hold and shifted off to the side, sounding almost indignant. "Swad *looooon* ."

Sakuya chuckled. "My lady, Miss Patchouli, I think its trying to tell you two something."

"Well, of course- - - *hya-choo!* ...Pardon me again." Remilia's grin was wide enough to make Patchouli wonder whether there was a leucrocotta somewhere in her ancestry. "It's telling us to stay friends forever, and all that goody-goody sort of malarkey. Like we needed it to tell *us* of all people that, correct?"

While nowhere near as wide, Patchouli's own smile showed a fair bit of teeth. "Correct. It will take more than some good-natured laughing at my expense to make me genuinely angry at you." She paused for a few moments, frowning. "I assume that it *was* good-natured, right?"

"...Um...yes?"

Beat. "...Fine. That's what we'll go with, then." Patchouli withdrew her hand from Remilia's, discreetly wiping it off with a small cloth. "So, what was it that you had wanted to talk to me about earlier?"

"Nothing major..." Sniff. "...But we had a visit from someone earlier. Sakuya?"

"Yes/Swa?" chorused the maid and the Pokémon, both standing at attention.

Remilia would've facepalmed had she not felt so weak. "Wait, you're named Sakuya too? ... Never mind. Sakuya *Izayoi?* "

"Yes, my lady/Swad *looon* ?"

"Oh, you're kidding me!" Remilia protested, disbelieving. "The same family name, too?... Oh, never mind. Just *one of you* tell Pache about our visitor!"

Sakuya *the human* was able to field this one. "It was the flower master, of all people. She claimed that she found something unusual while she was out on a walk recently." The maid handed Patchouli a strange, misshapen orange rock. "She caught wind of your knowledge of lore, decided that you could determine what this was, and asked that you get back to her when you had the time."

Patchouli accepted the rock, quietly noting the odd power at its core, but tucked it beneath her arm instead of examining it more closely. "I'll look into this later. Right now, I'm feeling tired both physically and mentally." She got up and slowly flew out of the room. "Come with me, Swadloon."

"Swaaa..." the Pokémon muttered, hopping off the bed and following her out.

The room was quiet for a minute.

"...Sakuya?" Remilia asked quietly.

"Yes, my lady?"

"First Meiling, then Flandre, and now Pache... when is it going to be *our* turn to get involved in some shenanigans?" the Mansion's mistress all but whined.

Sakuya sweatdropped. "You're hardly in a condition to worry about that right now..."

It was a short time later that Patchouli was resting again on her couch, the blanket covering her and the book she'd been reading earlier in her hands. Upon her return, she'd given Koakuma explicit orders that she was not to be disturbed and headed straight for her

home within her home, pausing only to leave the orange rock at her personal quarters. If she had her way, she would not leave the couch again until she was good and ready- - -...

"Swad *loooon."*

Patchouli glanced out the corner of her eye at her newest assistant, resting on the back of the couch almost right over her head. "You're sure you want to hang around here? I'm not the most amiable person around, and I don't have anything for you to do presently."

The Pokémon nodded. "Swa."

Patchouli gave it a long look, then nodded and returned her attention to her book. *As long as it doesn't bother me, it can stay here as long as it wants. I suppose I should probably be learning more about it, but that can wait.* She turned a page, riveted. *I'm more curious about this man's genius... how can he possibly learn the identity of an enemy attacker from its artwork?*

Munch.

Munch munch. Chew, swallow.

Munch, munch munch chew ouch.

Wait... that didn't come out right. Once more, with feeling!

Munch, chew chew chew **OUCH.**

Flandre's left hand went straight to her mouth, her eyes tearing up. *Not what I was talking about. NOT what I was talking about!* "Owww," she whined, trying to soothe an unexpected ache. She looked down at the dinner she was served, wondering why Sakuya's usual high-quality meal had hurt her mouth. *I need a second opinion, one that's not my own.* Swallowing her mouthful and setting down her silverware- - - ***gently*** - - -she called: "Ditz? Miss Ditz Queen?"

A quiet *thump* , a muffled "Ouchies *"* , and then her chamber door opened. Perched atop the canopy bed as usual, Skarmory was immediately alert... but it was only the nice fairy that was assigned to her. "Call me D. F., funny sister," she said cheerfully, hand on her forehead next to the spot where it had hit the door. "Everyone else does."

"Could you try this and tell me what you think?" Flandre requested, handing her what was left of a chicken leg.

D. F., needless to say, was thrilled. "Thanks! Don't mind if I do!" she exclaimed, taking the meat and happily chewing it off the bone piece by piece.

The next minute passed by quickly. By the time it was over, no trace of meat was left. D. F. did a little mid-air dance, waving the bone about. "Scary lady can cook, scary lady can cook!"

"So... there wasn't anything wrong with the meat?" Flandre asked.

"Tasty meat, tasty meat! It's good for your health!" D. F. sung, still dancing.

So there isn't anything wrong with the food. A worried gasp. *...But that means... there's something wrong with ME!* Flandre ran to the still open door, sending D. F. for a spin, and shouted at the top of her lungs. "Sakuya! *Sa-ku-yaaaaa!"*

Thankfully, it was the human that responded and not the Pokémon.

-GAP-

Lindsey Elliott was worried about her younger sister, as older siblings were supposed to be. *This* matter was more troublesome than she'd believed, though; she'd seen the document that Merril had discovered, and if that really *was* Miss Yakumo, then nothing short of Groudon itself would keep the girl away. And if Merril began to

experience more symptoms of the autoimmune illness she'd been diagnosed with...

So the Vigoroths' big bad gang leader set about preparing Merril for a journey, gathering the things she would need and sticking close to her like a nervous Kangaskhan. The red-eyed blonde swapped her sister's Vigoroth jacket and other attire for scarlet-colored slacks and a long-sleeved blouse, both with white around the edges; she'd wanted to go for a full-blown dress, but Merril objected ("I'm not going out looking like a doofus" were her exact words). Amongst other things she'd slipped several bottles of sunscreen into her pack, placed a wide-brimmed sun hat on her head, and found enough space yet in her pack for a parasol. Lindsey even updated her PokéNav with a half-dozen emergency contacts.

Finally, Lindsey stood back and gave Merril a once-over, closely followed by a thumbs-up. "There," she declared. " *Now* you look like daddy's little girl!"

"I look like an idiot in this hat," Merril protested, attaching Slakoth's Poké Ball to her belt. "I can understand the umbrella, but the hat on top of that?"

"I'm just trying to make sure you stay safe and in good health." Lindsey sat down in Merril's chair and hugged her sister close to her. "I wonder what Mom and Dad would say if they could see you now. I don't want them to have said that I wasn't doing my best to take good care of you." She sighed, letting Merril go. "Are you sure there's no way I can talk you out of going?"

"Big sis, my gut's telling me that I can't just ignore this." Merril double-checked her pack to make sure that her laptop and plug were already inside. "If I don't go, I'll regret it the rest of my life. I want answers from Yakumo and I'm going to get them, so this is one call I've got to jump at."

Lindsey wasn't pleased with that comment. "...The gang's right. You *do* spend too much time on the Internet."

"The gang can't tell the difference between a Caps Lock key and a Scroll Lock key, Lindsey. I wouldn't be taking their words at face value."

"That's what I'm talking about, Merril." Lindsey's frown was full-blown parental, and Merril's protests died on her lips. "Perhaps keeping you in relative seclusion due to your lupus was a mistake. Certainly letting you keep that computer in your room was. You've been staring at that screen for hours, doing next to nothing. Your abilities as a trainer have been growing stagnant; there've been no significant increases since you earned Wattson's badge."

Merril was thankful that her hair hid her eyes from view, distressed as she looked; getting a talking-to from her big sister always made her feel miserable. She opened her mouth to say something, but Lindsey answered her without knowing what she'd been wanting to tell her. "And don't give me any excuses about Slakoth being difficult to train. Maybe it is and maybe it isn't, but the rewards are definitely worth it. Just because *it* is a truant doesn't mean that *you* have to be; do you think its Ability kept me from raising it to a Vigoroth? For that matter, do you think it stopped Petalburg's gym leader from evolving his own Vigoroth into *Slaking* ?"

Merril stayed quiet, all of her arguments having fizzled out before she could offer them. She knew all of this already, of course; the topics had been raised on multiple occasions. Still, she knew that raising someone who was four years her junior could not have been easy for Lindsey, especially after considering that the older girl was still grieving in her own way for her long-dead parents. Therefore, she didn't open her mouth as long as the scolding was in progress.

Finally, Lindsey's argument ran out of steam. She took a long moment to catch her breath, then sighed. "I don't know why I bother. It's not like anything I say is going to stop you. Just... be careful out on the road, and *be wary* of thieves. I'm sure you know of those disappearances already."

"Don't worry so much, big sis. I'll be fine." Merril regained a bit of courage, offering Lindsey a quirky smile. "And if you don't mind me saying this, stop crying over Mom and Dad while I'm gone. It's not like you need to dress up as a Crobat and haunt the night for the rest of your life."

Merril saw Lindsey's eyes open wide at this, and she picked that moment to give her a hug of her own. It lasted only a few seconds before she let go and turned away, securing her pack. She waved at Lindsey and departed the room, giggling like someone half her age, and left the building as quickly as she was able.

Lindsey couldn't help it. Sadness from her departure, amusement from her parting remarks, and joy that she could finally make a name for herself hit her all at once and sparked an inevitable reaction. It wouldn't be for another minute and a half before she could regain control.

"Heh... eh-heh... eh-ha-ha-ha... *wa-ha-hahahahahaha~!"*

Her little sister was leaving, and she had wished with all her heart that Merril would choose to stay at home. She'd had a long-standing fear that something terrible would happen to her, due perhaps to lupus's side effects or external threats, and that her Pokémon wouldn't be able to help her. But now that the little geek had chosen Plan B instead of A, Lindsey found that she could do nothing more than wish her a safe journey. It wasn't like she could protect the girl forever.

If anyone had been in the room with Lindsey as she laughed, they would've seen her canines become significantly sharper.

-GAP-

Despite assurances that she was alright, Yukari had to put up with a large group of people clustered around her, asking questions and trying to help her out. *You'd think they'd never seen a* youkai

before... wait, never mind. "Look, people. I'm fine. I'm fine." She brushed aside another hand, trying to focus on the conversation she was embroiled in. "This is a library, isn't it? Please don't make me yell."

That made a few people stand aside, but not all of them. She sighed quietly, finally accepting that they wouldn't leave her alone, but thankful that at least they'd stopped yammering. With one distraction down, she focused her mind and words on dealing with the severely ticked off librarian that was glaring at her.

I can understand why she won't listen to me, Yukari thought even as she talked with the Rustboro Library's caretaker. *I can tell by looking at her that she's unwilling to understand. Hers is a mind firmly rooted in common sense. With that in mind, if I bet that she wouldn't last long in Gensokyo, I'd probably make some easy money.*

"..."

"...No. No. Absolutely not, with a capital 'A'." Mrs. Harrison's fists tightened as Yukari wrapped up her explanation. "I refuse to believe that you traveled from Mauville to here in less than 20 minutes on a bicycle."

Sometimes I hate being right.

"..." The child got up from the desk and walked away as they discussed this, trudging up the stairs.

"Well," Yukari offered, scratching her chin, "maybe those mapmakers were telling the truth after all... ...Eh, maybe not."

" *What* are you talking about?" Mrs. Harrison indignantly asked, irritated.

"Whoever created this was not using a proper scale of measurement." Yukari pulled out a map of Hoenn and unfolded it, showing it to her. "Judging from this, if you had a full load of Repels

to keep wild Pokémon away, you could probably make a complete circle of the Hoenn region in the time it takes to have a full six-on-six battle."

Midori's Poké Ball rattled a few times, then popped open to let her out. The Ninetales leaned as close to Yukari as she could, trying to get a closer look at the map and making little disapproving noises throughout.

Roxanne's Geodude gently maneuvered a few people out of the way, letting the gym leader get close enough to see what they were talking about. She frowned. "Madam, this map's older than *I* am. It's no wonder you're confused about this; before the advent of more advanced technology, cartographers were frequently confused about the exact size of Hoenn and its nearby islands. No one's ever been able to figure out why that was so, whether some Pokémon were messing with them or something else."

"Now that I'm thinking about it," Mrs. Harrison commented, "the exact same thing happened with Unova. Some explorers discovered the place some five-odd centuries ago, and it wasn't until recently that its true size became more apparent." She shook her head. "Which is why I don't buy your story, lady. It should've taken you three hours *at the least* to cross the distance between the two cities, even on a Mach Bike."

"It doesn't matter whether you believe it or not, Madam Librarian." Yukari folded the map back up and put it back inside the pack. "The fact remains is that it's the truth. Yes, I realize that it's highly improbable, but it's not impossible by any means."

"...Mother?" The child's voice gently called down from upstairs, barely heard over the librarian's disgruntled growling. There was something odd about her voice. "...Mother, there's something wrong with the scenery."

"...'With the scenery?'..." Mrs. Harrison softly wondered before she hurried off, jumping up the stairway two steps at a time. Yukari,

Midori, Roxanne, and several of those who had witnessed the crash followed her up; the youkai knew what the child spoke of already, but perhaps some visual proof would clear the doubt from their minds.

The little girl staring out the window was calm as she could be; Yukari was at a loss as to *why* she could stay that way in light of the destruction that had been caused. In an easterly direction through and over trees, a mountain, yet more trees and even a few buildings was a long furrow. Acres of foliage had been snapped and thrown aside, widening the paths; rocks from the mountain were strewn all over the route; dirt had been torn up and scattered about; distressed Pokémon were wandering about in the distance, trying to comprehend what just happened... and that was just what could be seen from the window. All in all, the routes to Verdanturf and Mauville had been extensively... *modified.*

As one, all eyes turned to Yukari. She met their disapproving stares with an indignant one. "Don't blame me. Blame the bike. It's evil!" she defended herself, folding her arms.

Mrs. Harrison squeezed her eyes shut, trying to purge the image of a cackling, deranged bicycle from her mind and wondering if she should just go home and cry. Roxanne shook her head at Yukari's childish response and walked away, deciding that finishing her work and getting out of the library would mean a return to a saner reality.

It took some time to get things straightened out. Amber had little choice but to contact Officer Jenny, and she in turn dragged the librarian and the youkai both aside for questioning. Yukari unashamedly admitted that she had purchased the bike earlier that morning, and that she'd been intending to travel to *Littleroot* , not Rustboro (although granted that would've been her next stop). She also brought up that it had not been her intention to cause trouble for the residents, whether they were human or Pokémon.

Jenny and Amber both found it hard to believe that *anyone* could have that much difficulty riding a bike, to which Yukari rolled her eyes

and said she was surprised that she wasn't carted off to jail right then and there for the destruction she caused. Jenny's response was to point out Midori- - -who was pressing up against her trainer's legs and licking her fingers worriedly- - -and tell Yukari that if the Ninetales had showed any signs of being mistreated, jail time would've been the least of her concerns. Comments about double standards simmered in the overseer's mind, but she decided to keep quiet.

Upon wrapping things up with the officer, Yukari was informed that she would be let off the hook on two conditions: One, that- - -in lieu of a trainer's license- - -she submit a complete and truthful profile about herself to the police department, for submission to the rest of Hoenn's police force in case something like this happened again; and two, that she do whatever she could to help clean up the library's entrance (fixing *all* the damage she'd done was probably too much to hope for). Yukari saw no problems with the first condition, but the second one made her understandably nervous.

What I don't understand is why she didn't take that bike away, Yukari wondered irritably as she swept up the broken glass, remembering that the bike was completely undamaged from the trip. *I imagine calling it 'Calvinbane' would be rather fitting.*

"Niiiiwf?" Midori questioned her from the front desk, where she'd chosen to wait while her trainer finished her work.

Yukari couldn't understand the Ninetales, but she *could* make a reasonable guess. "Don't worry about it. I'm fine." Some of the glass shards were transferred to a storage bin for the locals to deal with. "Just a minor inconvenience, I assure you."

Beat. "Niiiinewf?"

"Maybe I could, maybe I couldn't. I'd still prefer to get my license before anything else goes wrong," Yukari muttered, scowling. "Ugh. I'm not cut out for this sort of work..."

Amber sipped her coffee, keeping a close eye on her. "Sheesh. You haven't done an ounce of honest work in your life, have you?"

"Why do that when I can get everyone else to do it for me and make *them* feel like they accomplished something important?"

"You're... not kidding, are you?" came the cautious question.

Yukari's smile gleamed under the library's lights. "Is this a face that would lie to you?"

"Yes. Not only would it lie to me, but it would give me half-truths and shaded facts while having the gall to claim they were legitimate."

Yukari sunk down a little, only managing to support herself thanks to her broom. "Well, just remember that I'm telling you the truth. Like I said, it doesn't matter whether you believe it or not."

"...So you're claiming you're a strategist," Mrs. Harrison's daughter commented from her seat, speaking just loud enough to be heard. Her nose was buried in the same book she'd been reading when Yukari had slammed onto her desk.

A puzzled look was directed the girl's way. "I never once claimed to be a chessmaster, little girl."

"...It takes a lot of planning to mislead people into thinking that they're responsible for their own actions." Page flip. "...Only someone incredibly lucky or incredibly devious could pull it off. ...By your own admittance, you're lazy but brilliant. ...You delegate your work to others without their awareness, and they feel satisfied when it's done. Meanwhile, your feet are up on the desk while you treat yourself to the alcoholic beverage of your choice. ...Everyone wins."

The library was silent. If you listened carefully, you could probably hear crickets somewhere in the room. If you looked carefully, you could see Midori eating one.

"..." Ellen's eyes flicked up, staring past her book at the *look* Yukari was giving her. "...Close the blinds. Your disbelief is showing."

It took until the end of that sentence for Yukari to realize that she'd been sweeping the same square foot of space even after all the glass fragments had been cleaned up. Stopping, she reached up and closed her mouth manually before turning to Amber. "Has she always been this..."

"Rude? Disrespectful?" Amber finished sourly. "Anti-social?"

If Ellen was offended by those adjectives, she chose not to show it.

"I was going to say 'brilliant'. She took my own words, separated the pieces, and put them back together in a way that summarized my personality more or less accurately. For a child, she has an incredibly sharp mind."

Amber finished the last of her coffee and sighed. She didn't answer her at first, instead turning to her daughter. "Ellen? What would you think of visiting Wally's place for pizza later today?"

"...Okay, mother," the child agreed, her book once more concealing her face.

That was the response Amber expected of her. She stepped as close to Yukari as the counter would allow and hissed: "You, too. You and I need to have a little chat."

"Well, I *do* have some research I'd like to..." Yukari started to say, but interrupted herself after seeing the librarian's perturbed look. "...Hmmm, alright. It's been a while since I last had any pizza. Why not?"

As long as tofu isn't one of the toppings. I could never understand why Ran adores it so much. Shaking her head, she reluctantly returned to the task at hand. Much as she would've liked it to, this mess wasn't going to clean itself up.

Early that afternoon...

The restaurant Amber spoke of was rather small-time, but had enough costumers to stay in business; most were locals, including a few first-stage Pokémon that accompanied them, with only one person noted to be a travelling trainer. The head chef- - -the eponymous Wally- - -introduced himself to Yukari as a former corporate engineer from Unova's Castelia City, having moved to Hoenn after accepting a hefty retirement package. The youkai was about to ask why he switched to a lower-paying job before deciding that she didn't really want to know.

Amber ordered a medium-sized pizza with some assorted vegetable toppings; almost as an aside, she also asked for some food that Midori would probably enjoy. Afterwards, while Wally was at work, Ellen slipped away towards the ladies' room; Yukari noticed that all the females in the restaurant, barring herself and Amber, stood up as one and followed after her. The youkai snorted quietly at the phenomenon.

A glint in Amber's eyes signalled that she was ready to speak, and Yukari turned her full attention on her. "I have a confession to make," the librarian murmured. "Ellen is the black sheep of the family. She should've inherited her father's drive to help others, my enjoyment of watching others learn and grow, our fondness of good Pokémon battles, *something* that gives an indication that she's definitely our child. Her siblings certainly did."

"Essentially she's not a born and raised stoic," Yukari summarized. "Something else made her that way."

Next to her, Midori kept trying to climb into the booth alongside Yukari. Due to her size and how bushy her tails were, all her attempts kept ending in failure.

"Yes. I don't know what or who, but something influenced her to have a pessimistic view of the world and retain that insufferable calm."

Amber didn't look up when a glass of fruit punch was placed before her. "She's not your standard child. Regular children, they say things like 'mama' or 'dada' when they speak for the first time. The first thing *she* ever said was 'you're standing in my light, please move'."

Yukari's eyes narrowed as she sipped from the glass of ice water she'd been given. "It doesn't take a psychologist to figure out that's not normal. How old was she when she first spoke?"

"Four years old."

Blink, and blink again. Yukari ignored Midori when the Ninetales pressed against her, trying to fit inside the booth. " *Four?* Eeeesh... and what about when she started reading?"

"When she was about a year or so old." Amber clasped her hands on the table. "At first it was just books with simple lettering, colorful pictures of cute Pokémon and such, the sorts of things any toddler would read. By the time she was two and a half, she'd stopped getting involved in her siblings' usual antics and focused entirely on making sense of the library's botany books. Most of it she couldn't understand, but that didn't last long." She sighed deeply.

Botany...? Sip. "I see..."

"That girl absorbs knowledge like a sponge, but she's delegated almost everything else as a second priority," Amber continued. Across from her, the whining Midori fell sideways out of the booth.

Knowledge... "How so?" Yukari asked as Midori tried again, pushing heavily against her side. *No question as to whose analogue* she's *supposed to be, then. I'm surprised that purple's not her color, but I suppose not all things are universal.*

"No desire to have a Pokémon for herself, a complete refusal to travel and see the world, anti-social with no friends..." Amber locked eyes with Yukari, her face the epitome of parental worry. "I've tried everything I could to bring her out of her shell, to no avail. I've heard

the stories about Team Galactic's leader; I don't want her to turn out the same way. She may be an oddball, but she's still my baby girl."

"Mm." Sip. "Excuse the change of topic, but... Team Galactic's leader? Who's he?"

Amber frowned. "What rock have you been under the past few months, Ms. Yakumo?"

"Humor me. Who is he?" Yukari asked, focusing past the nine tails that waved in front of her face.

"You don't know who he is? Really, now - - -"

"...Don't tell her anything, mama," Ellen's voice interrupted. She climbed into the booth next to her mother. "...She's not good people."

"Ellen dear, I'll decide whether to tell her something or not. How do you know she's not a good person?" Amber inquired testily.

"...I'm getting the shivers just from being in close proximity to her." Ellen was, of course, as calm as the wind at the equator. "...Look at her face. Look at her eyes. Then you tell me she's not a monster, mama."

"Youkai, technically."

"...Say that again?" both mother and daughter asked, not caring that Midori had finally succeeded in fitting into the seat across from them.

"I'm a youkai, not a monster." Yukari took a drink, working her glass down about halfway. "Bit of a difference there."

Amber and Ellen gazed first at Yukari, then at each other. The overseer could see the metaphorical light bulbs fizzling on and off as they gave her statement some serious thought. The mother took a good long drink of her fruit punch, placed the cup down... then they both stared Yukari in the eyes and said:

"...What's a youkai?"

"...Never mind." Yukari shook her head as Wally reappeared briefly, giving Ellen a smaller glass of fruit punch before getting back to work. "If you don't want to tell me who he is, fine. But as long as I'm needing to do research, I may as well ask around for that person's identity."

"What sort of research are you intending to do?" asked Amber, holding out her hand to keep Ellen from interrupting.

"Legendary Pokémon." Yukari's half-closed eyes glittered as she spoke, and this time she was sure that Amber, too, could feel some dangerous vibes from her. "Care to hear the details?"

"I saw a coffee stain once that looked like Groudon's head," Wally remarked as he showed up at the table with Midori's meal. "I added some more coffee and gave it Pikachu's body." He placed the bowl of specially-made food in front of the Ninetales, waited until she started eating, then returned to attend to the pizza(s) in progress.

"...On second thought, maybe we can continue the discussion later," Yukari admitted, completely thrown off by the chef's non sequitor.

Both Harrisons nodded, sensing that the mood train had been derailed. "Agreed."

It was one of those rare days where she was permitted to take some time off from her job. There was no need to look after the reactor, as a select team of kappa and several of the Underground's more unique youkai had been tasked with keeping things in order until she returned. It would be tough going, sure, but the bunch were confident that there'd be no major disasters requiring the 'services' of the Hakurei shrine. She'd shared what knowledge she could with them, then left for home to see what she could do today.

However, although Utsuho was gifted with powers far beyond the understanding of mortals...

" *SHINYYYYY!"*

...birds will always be birds.

Satori turned the stone over between her fingers a few times, appraising it. There wasn't anything special about it; it was only about as big as her thumb, and its coloring faded from orange to a light gray. It was about as common a rock as any in the Underground, and most people probably would've discarded it.

It said something that Utsuho was willing to show it to her, though. Ravens and crows typically hoarded any pretty-looking trinkets they found, and they fussed and chattered if anyone tried to take the things from them. If Utsuho wanted to give it to her, it was a sign not only that the hell raven thought highly of her and wanted to please her, but also that Satori took excellent care of her pets.

"It's a very lovely gift, Utsuho. Thank you."

As she was thrilled that Satori had liked her gift, Utsuho's face was made of grin. It faded when Satori asked her: "So. Did you think about how you wanted to spend your time today?"

Utsuho gave the floor a dejected look; she honestly hadn't given it much thought. "Um... where's Rin?"

"She told me that she wanted to improve her 'Cat's Walk' Spell Card," Satori explained to her. "So, she's asking around for someone to give her dancing lessons."

"...Dancing lessons? I don't get it."

"Neither do I, Utsuho. Neither do I. But it made perfect sense in her mind, and she promised to be home in time for dinner, so I let her off

for the day as well." Satori placed the rock on her desk, next to the manuscript she'd been writing when Utsuho had arrived. "So. What were you wanting to do?"

What was I wanting to do? ...What was I...? Oh! The oni! The oni said that someone new showed up to challenge them! "Master, I think I want to see... um..."

"Whoever it was that was foolish enough to accept an oni's challenge?" Satori finished for her. "Well, if that's what you want to do, then by all means go ahead. Be careful, alright?"

"Okay!" Utsuho whirled around and flew out the door, wings flapping furiously in her eagerness. "See you later, Master!"

There was a short wait before her pet could no longer be heard, likely having left the Palace by now. Taking the rock she'd been given, Satori reached into a desk drawer and pulled out a small jar. After dropping the rock inside the jar and watching it land between all the other trinkets she'd been given over the years, she put the container away and resumed her writing where she'd left off.

Utsuho stopped in front of her door a second later, gazing curiously at her. She gave a little half-smile, thoughts ringing with goodwill, then left as quietly as she came. Satori looked up towards the door, a question mark appearing over her head, then shrugged and went back to work.

"Ma- *chooooke!"*

"Come and get it, big guy!"

A small crowd had gathered in the Underground City, watching Yuugi and her opponent- - -a musclebound humanoid akin to a tail-less reptile- - -trade blows and occasional danmaku bursts. The humanoid couldn't fly, and its bullets were limited by its need to

concentrate prior to shooting them, but for now the combination of strength and martial arts skill balanced out Yuugi's raw power. Yuugi for her part was holding back, more interested in having a good fight than in overwhelming her foe with her Spell Cards.

It was this scene that greeted Utsuho when she arrived. She hovered at the back of the crowd and looked on as the fight progressed; she cheered with everyone else when Yuugi seemed to get the upper hand, and quieted when the humanoid put her on the defensive.

A chop from its left hand missed Yuugi by centimeters, giving the oni what she believed was an opening; she wrapped a bullet around her hand and tried to tag the humanoid's shoulder with it. No fool, the creature cut its chop short, tightened its hand into a fist and swung out to intercept the punch. Both fists connected solidly with each other, the bullet bursting on impact, and for a few seconds both combatants strained to push the other one back.

Assorted commentary did the rounds around the crowd, some of them making bets on who would win while others were content to see someone give the oni a worthwhile match. Utsuho overheard someone say that it was a best 2-of-3 competition, with Yuugi winning the first bout and the humanoid squeaking past in the second, but none of it really sunk in.

Utsuho turned to the nearest onlooker, the question she wanted to ask finally taking form. "Excuse me, but who's that she's fighting?"

"The Underground's newest resident, he is," said the small green youkai. "The brute showed up from out of nowhere, heavy lifting and such it does. Then the oni he walks up to, showing off its muscles. Been fighting for a week, they have."

"A week?" Utsuho looked unsure. "Nonstop? How would they have that much endurance?"

"Not nonstop," the youkai chided her, watching as Yuugi jumped over a fiery fist. "Meet everyday for fights, they do. Our language the brute can't speak, but suffice to say that barrier is no obstacle."

"Hmmm..."

Utsuho's brain latched onto a specific thought. *What would it be like to really understand someone, whether it's through fighting or something else? There's no one else like me who can fully comprehend the powers I control. None of my fellow birds are capable of it. Some amongst the kappa try, they really do, but even they can't make much progress. What else is there? What can I do?*

So distracted was she that she missed the **whump** that signalled the end of the fight. Utsuho looked up in time to see Yuugi stand up straight, the defeated brute lying dazed in a small crater. "Hah. You're getting stronger, I'll give you that... I may need to up the ante soon," the oni decided over the crowd's murmurings. She stooped down and helped the brute to its feet. "Keep working at it, big guy. Same time tomorrow?"

"Machoke," the humanoid replied, smiling toothily and giving Yuugi a thumbs up. The Deva grinned back and waved, then the two parted ways. The crowd around them dispersed, returning to their own lives and talking to each other about the latest fight.

Utsuho walked off absentmindedly, her mind working as best as it could. She still had the rest of the day ahead of her, and there were any number of things to do. *Should I try to find more pretty rocks? Try to meet someone new?*

Utsuho flew past Utsuho just then, minding her own business and chewing some sort of sweet treat. The hell raven opted not to notice. *Maybe I could try to find Rin, see if she found someone to teach her how to dance. Maybe she could teach me how to dance, too? It sounds like fun. I wonder what Master Satori would... would...*

Things finally clicked in the birdbrain's head. *Waaiiiit a second! Did I just go past here? Where was I going?* ... She gasped. *The Palace! Home! What would I want there? Why am I going there?*

...Well, only one way to find out!

Thus distracted from her original goal, Utsuho whirled around and flew off towards home. *I hope I didn't take my control rod. I need it more than I do!*

Utsuho hadn't taken her control rod.

The Searing Divine Flame had only returned half a minute before, licking her lips after she finished eating that nice little snack that someone in the city had given her. She pondered what else she could do for a few seconds before deciding that her time was best spent exploring. There was a lot to see, and so little time with which to do it.

She searched her room for any spare change. Some shiny yen here, a bit of copper there...

"Heeeeyyyyy!"

The door to her room burst open, and Utsuho flew in. Expecting a fight, she'd rushed to retrieve her control rod from its hiding place before racing straight for where she'd expected herself to be. With her free hand, she pointed at herself and shouted: "Listen, me! I know I'm very good looking, but I want me to leave. Now!"

Utsuho shook her head at the order. "Why should I? I have no authority over me any more than I have authority over me."

"But you're going around being me!" Utsuho protested. "That's just wrong. The only one who's allowed to be me around here is me!"

"What kind of silly logic is that?" Utsuho retorted. She pointed at herself. "If I'm me..." ...and then at Utsuho. "And *I'm* me, then by all rights *I* should be allowed to go around being me."

Utsuho huffed. "That's not fair. Why couldn't I be someone else?"

"Why would I *want* to be someone else? There's nothing wrong with being me."

"But if both of me are being me, I wouldn't be able to live with myself, and then one of me would have to go."

"I raise a good point. Okay, how about a challenge? If I can prove that I'm allowed to be me, then I'll stop being me. But if I can't, then I'll keep being me. Does that work for me?"

Utsuho nodded. "Okay, but how will I know when the challenge will begin? I don't have a means of keeping time, and unless I don't, I'm stuck- - -"

"SHHUUUTTT UUUUUPPPP! Shut up! Shut up! Shut up, shut up!"

Utsuho and Utsuho, both of them beside themselves with shock, whirled around to face the door...and Rin, presently in the midst of a freakout. "Rin!"

"I don't know why there are two Utsuhos, but that can wait!" Rin tried mightily to calm herself down, but was only partially successful. "Just... *stop* being so confusing! You keep referring to each other in the first person, like you were yourself, and it's just... I can't understand a thing~!" she wailed.

One nuclear bird looked at the other, their wings drooping and their arms lowered. "It wasn't what we meant to do," the one on the right admitted. "It just came naturally to us, is all."

"Weren't you going to take dancing lessons or something?" Utsuho wondered.

"Yeah, I found someone to teach me, but I'm not starting until tomorrow... c'mon, we're getting off track!" Rin pointed at both Utsuhos in turn. "Which of you is the real deal? Which of you is my best friend? *Which of you is Utsuho?"*

"That would be her," said the one on the right, pointing at her lookalike. "She's the one with the metal stick on her arm."

"And the galaxy on her cape isn't moving," Utsuho pointed out. "So by default, she's the imposter."

Rin blinked, surprised. *Um... alright?* "Wait, it's that easy?"

"It's that easy," said not-Utsuho, sitting on the bed. "For the sake of the simple-minded, my race can completely transform themselves into other beings." She ignored Utsuho's awed chirp. "Those at high enough levels can imitate humans, too... or I suppose the correct term would be 'youkai', in your case."

The birdbrain was immediately hooked. "So... how'd you know to turn into me? Why not Rin, or even master Satori?" she questioned her, removing her control rod now that there wasn't much chance of a fight breaking out.

"I was in the reactor yesterday, and I'd seen you at work," the imposter confessed. "I was new to the area, so I wanted to look around and see the sights. Borrowing your form seemed like a good bet to make."

Now managing to regain control of her emotions, Rin was just as fascinated. "Well, you didn't cause anyone any trouble, so we can let you off the hook if you behave yourself. What do you really look like?"

Not-Utsuho obliged their unspoken request... turning into a small pink blob. Said blob saluted them the best it could. "Ditto!"

"Aw, it's so adorable!" Utsuho stooped down and picked Ditto up, holding it in her arms. "Where's master Satori? I want to ask her if I can keep it!"

"Aren't you getting a little ahead of yourself?" Rin asked, sweatdropping. "Yeah, it's cool and all, but we still don't know where it came from."

"But it's so cute! How can something so cute be dangerous to us?"

"Not all cute things are harmless," the kasha reminded her. "You should know that better than anyone."

"...Oh. Right," Utsuho murmured, wings drooping again. She set Ditto back down on the floor. "But it's still adorable. ... Wait!" she shouted, a finger raised. "It can turn into me, right? If I taught it how to work in the reactor, wouldn't it be able to earn its keep?"

"Wouldn't people start wondering if they start seeing two of you around, though?" Rin leaned against the door frame. "I know *I* did."

Ditto glowed white, re-transforming into Utsuho for the sake of communication. "I wouldn't need to look *exactly* like her," she suggested. "Remember, I can completely transform into other beings." She smiled. "Becoming a male of her species won't be a problem."

Rin's eyebrows raised. "I don't have any better ideas... ...well, alright. But this I just *have* to see."

Utsuho nodded, staying quiet for the moment and likely wondering if the claim was true.

Seeing that they were both in agreement, Ditto again showed off its transformative abilities. The clothes it was mimicking shifted into

more of a formal uniform, and the bow in its hair turned into some sort of strange hat (although the average outsider would've recognized it as a baseball cap immediately). The feminine features became more masculine, proving Ditto's claim, and Rin had to admit that a male raven youkai was easy on the eyes.

Utsuho agreed. Wholeheartedly. She staggered back a step, then forward again. "...Rin? ...I think... I think I..."

"...Uh-oh," Ditto managed to utter before Utsuho, completely overwhelmed, fainted into his arms.

Rin had to cover her mouth to keep from laughing. "Hee... I bet you have girls falling for you left and right back home, huh?"

"It's not my fault, I swear!"

The next day...

"Master! Master, master, master, quickly, quickly, quickly!"

Satori set aside her quill pen as the excited voice and thoughts of her hell raven became too much to ignore. She turned to Utsuho, curious at the repetitive 'happy happy joy joy' that circulated in her mind; the nuclear bird was in the doorway, jumping up and down over and over. "Yes? What are you so excited about?"

"Come quickly! Come quickly!" Utsuho repeated, beckoning her. "I have to show you something!" As soon as the last word was out of her mouth, she whirled around and flew off.

Well, she's in a remarkably good mood this evening. I wonder what's gotten her feathers ruffled?

Satori obligingly got up and followed Utsuho out of the room, flying at a more sedate pace; by the time she reached the room set aside for the raven's use, her pet was all but bursting at the seams. "Well,

Utsuho? Are you going to tell me what the news is, or am I going to have to guess?" she asked, smiling kindly.

Utsuho pointed at her bed, giggling. Quirking an eyebrow, Satori examined the bundle of blankets that lay at one end. *A bit unusual... they're usually more strewn about than this.* There was an indentation pressed into the center of it... again, strange. *Why is it...*

Then she saw the eggs. There were five of them, each of them a light cream in color with specks of black and brown... and just as Satori fully ascertained what they were, Utsuho picked her up in a joyous bear hug. "Master Satori! I'm so happy... *I'm going to be a mother!"*

There was really only one word that fit this situation, and Satori knew it.

"...What."

"Young mistress, could you open your mouth wide for just a moment?"

Flandre couldn't help but offer Sakuya a curious look. "Hm? Oh. Okay." She did as she was told, her bright white teeth all but gleaming in the dim light.

Sakuya leaned in for a closer look, examining the inside of her mouth from several different angles. Finishing the checkup, she straightened and frowned. "...Well, young mistress, I don't have an answer as to *how* this happened, but I think I know why you've been having trouble chewing your food."

"Really? What is it?"

"It's your fangs."

"Huh? What about them?" Flandre made no effort to keep the worry out of her voice.

Sakuya hesitated a few moments before she answered, having trouble believing what she was saying: "Your teeth are no different from mine or those of my co-workers, young mistress. Your fangs... have *shrunk."*

Swadloon's Moveset: Bug Bite, String Shot, (Unknown), (Unknown)

Approximate Level: 22

Patchouli's Notes: There is little that I wish to say about my newest assistant, aside from it being unable to get along with Koakuma. Leave me be.

Ditto's Moveset: Transform

Approximate Level: 58

Utsuho's Notes: What can I say? This is wow. Just pure and utter wow! Not only is it me, but it can be a male me! Or an oni! Or an earth spider! Or a satori! Or a tanuki! ...Wait, that's a reindeer. Don't be mad at me, doctor, I'm not sick or anything! I'm just happy!

-ORIGINAL CHARACTER ALERT-

Name: Get That D&-/ Fairy Out Of The Kitchen!, or D.F. for short.

Quote: "No, I'm not confusing, just stupid."

Age: Unknown.

Species: Fairy.

Physical Description: A green-garbed fairy maid, one of many in the employ of Remilia Scarlet. Has the physical body of a 7-year-old human. Has twig-shaped wings with thin membranes. Short but unruly brown hair, and eyes of the same color. Wears a dandelion-shaped hair decoration behind her maid's headdress.

Personality: Like the rest of the fairies at the Mansion, D.F. is a few doughnuts short of a bakery... from a human's standpoint; from the view of her fellow staffers, she's clueless enough to make *them* look smart. Previously unnamed, it is said that she earned her moniker by causing a complete mess the first time she set foot in the kitchen. She lumps most of the people she knows into either "funny", "scary", "funny and scary", or "scary and funny" categories (and in her mind, it isn't as redundant as it seems). Absolutely loves sweet-tasting foods.

History: Lived in the Forest of Magic for many years before happily becoming the 'pet' of a noblewoman's descendant. Leonard Kirisame, amongst others, is rumored to have successfully convinced Remilia Scarlet to add the then-unnamed fairy to her staff later on (although how he did so remains a mystery to this day). Since every chore she ever tried to do ended in a spectacular disaster, it was decided that she could best serve by keeping a post near Flandre's chamber and alerting Sakuya whenever the younger Scarlet needed something. Even this at times is too much for D.F.'s tiny brain, but she willingly follows her instructions anyway.

Abilities: Dessert detection; if anyone is eating a sweet treat in the Mansion or in the surrounding area, she knows it. Aside from that, she also has the generic fairy powerset: flight, danmaku, and regenerative immortality.

-SEMI-ORIGINAL CHARACTER ALERT-

Our little stoic child may be Patchouli's analogue in this story- - -no need to hide that fact- - -but she's still a by-product of my mind.

Name: Ellen Harrison

Quote: "...You're standing in my light."

Age: 10 years

Species: Human

Physical Description: A bit short for her age. Has dark brown hair, almost black, that doesn't quite reach her shoulders and comes equipped with a pink alice band. Favors a blue shirt and pink corduroys. Has average strength, and keeps it that way by swimming and gardening whenever she isn't occupied with her books.

History: Pretty much the way it was described in-story. It should also be noted that although she doesn't have any Pokémon, she finds grass-types fascinating to watch.

Abilities: That enhanced intelligence of hers is not entirely natural...

Never Question the Inscriptions

MONSTERS IN PARADISE

Intermission No. 2

By: Curtis Wildcat

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You know, considering how many weird things have taken place in this story, I'm surprised y'all are still reading it. I can't complain, though; it just shows that you people have a good sense of humor. Thanks for your interest thus far, and here's to the end of the story, whenever and wherever that may be.

Anyway, that aside, there's a substantial number of characters and Pokémon that don't have any real bearing on this story. Here's what a few of them have been up to while the plot has been progressing. The floor's yours, Uncle.

"One *more* thing...!"

They came from out of nowhere, populating the Lunar Capital. At first there were only a few of them, but as the days went by more and more showed up. By the time the last of them arrived, there was an average of one creature for every eight people.

What were they? Clefairies. Lots and lots of Clefairies.

The Watatsuki sisters were seated at their residence as a group of Clefairies danced around them. Toyohime was taking their presence in stride, sharing a bowl of peaches with them; by contrast, Yorihime was feeling increasingly antsy. "Why do we have to put up with

them?" she asked aloud as she stood up, just this side of irritated. "What are they lingering around *here* for?"

"Keep your cool, sister. Keep your cool." Toyohime patted one of the Clefairies between the ears. "None of the warning flags were triggered, so evidently they're of a pure race. The rabbits seem to like them, the rest of us even more so." She smiled, relaxed. "They're not doing anyone or anything any harm, Yorihime. Leave them be."

Yorihime closed her eyes and forced herself to sit back down. She was right, of course, but still... "If you say so. But there's still one that's bothering me about them..."

"And what would that be?"

Several of the Clefairies, deciding that Yorihime was good company, left Toyohime alone and gathered around her instead. They poked her face, tugged on her hair, and decided her lap was a good place to sit. It was when one of them started squeaking and nuzzling her arm happily that Yorihime finally vented her frustrations at the ceiling:

"JUST WHERE IN THE COSMOS DID THESE THINGS COME FROM, ANYWAY?!"

Sunny Milk and her friends weren't the brightest candles on the candelabrum, but there were a handful of things that they knew for sure. For one, there was only *three* of them. For another, none of them had large mouths growing out the backs of their heads. And for a third, they were fairies.

Not only was there one too many residents in their tree, but the intruder- - -something which was definitely *not* a fairy- - -had two mouths to feed, and it was helping itself to their food when they found it that morning.

For its part, Mawile had trouble believing what it was seeing. Three kids, no more than eight years old or so, had wings on their back and were *hovering. Are the* humans *starting to evolve now?* it was thinking. *That's going to make escaping from trainers harder...*

Sunny finally recovered and pointed a quivering finger at it. "Hey! You... whatever you are. Get away from our food! That's o-ours!"

Luna's fists tightened. "And stop drinking that! Do you think I hoard coffee beans just so someone else can steal it? Really!"

Star kept quiet. She was still in awe of the large mouth that the youkai, or whatever it was, had on its head and wondered if that meant that its appetite was equally great.

Mawile, meanwhile, felt offended. Who was it to obey anyone's orders? *I'm a free spirit. I don't have to listen to anyone!* Facing the fairies, it let its tongue hang out and tugged on one of its eyelids before promptly guzzling down the contents of the cup it was holding.

Luna's face turned a royal blue. Shocked and angry, she could do nothing but stutter for several seconds. "Wha... fwa... ha... me... shu... bwa... why... *why you little...!"* she finally shrieked, lunging at Mawile... and tripping, getting stuck in its second mouth.

The startled Pokémon was pushed off its feet, not fully prepared for that action. It waved its arms frantically, lost its balance and fell forward...

"LUNAAAAA!"

...and being caught off guard, it barely had time to register Sunny's overenthusiastic dive before the living light reflector plowed into it, freeing Luna and triggering an out and out brawl. The pair tumbled about, squealing and yelling as they both sought to evict each other from the tree. The fight intensified when Luna- - -still furious over the theft of her coffee- - -rejoined it.

And Star? She took a quick stock of their food supplies and decided to whip up a quick meal, sidestepping the brawlers whenever they got too close. "Winner gets dinner!" she declared.

Only the angry noises of the combatants answered her.

"Okay, so... no, that's not quite it."

"Don't worry. Remember, it's *supposed* to be noisy. Let's take it from the top, okay?"

"Alright. One, two, three, four!..."

Mystia and Kyouko were taking breaks from their respective jobs, discussing and practicing their next musical gig. Granted it was mostly noise from the villagers' perspective, but they were still working on that; it was the sort of thing to be expected from aspiring punk rockers.

No, dear readers: this is not a trick of the eyes. Punk rock really does exist in the Eastern Wonderland. Be very afraid.

After another half minute or so of practice, the song they were working on ground to a halt. Kyouko sighed. "This just isn't working. We need to find a backup singer."

Mystia huffed. "What do you think I've been trying to locate for the past month? No one wants to work with a band that doesn't sound 'coherent'."

"'Coherent'?" Kyouko fumed.

"That's what they said, not me."

Kyouko sat down on a nearby rock. "Well, we'll just have to start sounding *more* coherent, then... how are we going to do that?"

"Puff."

Mystia shook her head. "No, not a puff. I think we ought to- - -...wait. 'Puff'?" she asked, doing a double-take.

The little pink fluffball that had just joined them nodded emphatically. "Puff."

The two youkai were taken back at its presence. Mystia was the first to recover, having a bit more experience in dealing with Pokémon (primarily Creampuff) than Kyouko. "Look. I don't know what you are, but I don't care. If you're not here for an audition, don't bother us."

This seemed to anger the fluffball. It glared at the two of them, inflating itself while trying to make itself look intimidating.

"...On second thought, maybe we should give it a chance?" Kyouko tentatively suggested, more amused than afraid. "It looks like it wanted to answer your request..."

"Well... alright," Mystia decided. "It's not like we're going to get any other offers anytime soon. Let's hear you sing, fluffball."

Thrilled at the idea, the fluffball shrank back to normal size and smiled. It took out a small microphone-like object, cleared its voice and started to sing...

"Jigggg-ly puff, jigglyyyy-puff... jiggggg-ly puff jiggglyyyyyyyy... Jiggg-gly puff, jigglyyyy-puff... jiggggg-ly puff jiggglyyyyyyyy..."

On the downside, once Mystia and Kyouko woke up an hour later, they had to spend half an hour trying to clean the black moustaches, tic-tac-toe boards, swirls and other squiggles off their faces... and more importantly, they still had no backup singer. On the other hand, that hour's sleep was the best that they'd had in years.

"One, step, two, step, three, step, four be-low... one, step, two, step, three, step, four let's go..."

Down in the Underground, someone else was having more success in her music-related endeavors. Rin, who- - -as has been previously noted- - -had sought out a dance instructor to improve one of her Spell Cards, was progressing pretty well. Another week, she felt, and she'd be able to replace her old "Cat's Walk" card with an upgraded one.

Following the first session of the day, during a short break to allow Rin to rest, the skull-like monster ghost demonstrated another set of dance steps. This one got the kasha's interest as she watched it go backwards by going forward, humming something ominous. "Are you floating while you do that, or is there some trick to it?"

As it stopped humming, the monster held up both hands and nodded: it was a little of both. "Dus-clops."

"Huh... Stick around a while more, would you? I think I'd like to learn that, too."

When the ghost agreed, Rin was all smiles. *This is going to be a fun day,* she thought as she prepared to follow her teacher's example.

As for Dusclops, it hadn't planned on being stuck in this strange place, but as long as it was it figured that it may as well do something worthwhile with its time. Teaching this girl what it remembered of its former master's abilities qualified as "worthwhile".

Again, be very afraid.

"A word with you please, Kamishirasawa-san?"

Keine, who'd been out for a short walk around the village, turned when she heard that voice. She recognized Sekibanki, the youkai who passed herself off as a human and lived in the village proper. "Ah... yes. Something I can help you with?" Surprised blink. "... And might I add that your hat clashes with your clothes?"

"This isn't a hat," Sekibanki grumbled. She tried to remove it, but with no success as the bird had a tight grip on her hair. "It's a bluebird pretending to *be* a hat, and it doesn't want to leave. Mind giving me a hand?"

Keine raised her hand to her chin, thinking as she examined the sleeping bird. "It's not trying to hurt you, is it?"

"...Well, no... but it's the principle of the thing. How am I supposed to get any respect with this Pokey Mon- - -"

"Po *ké* mon," Keine corrected.

"Right... anyway, this looks just plain silly, and I don't want anyone laughing at me."

"Bluebirds with cloud wings are more cute than funny... but, I see what you mean." Keine gestured for Sekibanki to follow her, then headed for home. "Come on. Pie gave me something earlier that should be able to help."

"I never did trust that clown." Sekibanki picked up her pace a bit to keep up with Keine. "Putting him and this bird together will probably be bad news. I hope you know that."

"If you say so. I still don't see what's so silly about that bird sitting there." Keine winked at her. "It's not worth losing your head over."

Sekibanki sighed irritably. "If I had five yen for each time I've heard that sorry joke..."

"Sorry, sorry."

A wave of the hand. "It's alright, I guess. So, what did the clown give you?"

Keine smiled. "He found it while he was on patrol...I'm still trying to decide if I want to keep it. It's this little gray kitten with large blue eyes- - -"

" *BLUUUUUU!"*

The Swablu had been becoming more and more awake as they went along, to the point where it could follow the pair's conversation. Mistaking the kitten's description for that of an Espurr, it panicked; still holding on tight to Sekibanki's hair, it lifted off and began to fly in quick circles around the two, squawking all the while.

Keine started to speak, but Sekibanki held up her hand to stop her. "If you even *dare* to ask me if I've lost my mind," the youkai warned, her head glaring at Keine from the Swablu's tiny talons, "you and I will be mincing Spell Cards instead of words."

The schoolteacher expelled a sigh of her own. "You know, I'd probably be more tolerant of your kind here if you improved your sense of humor..." she told her, voice barely heard over the bird's frightened calls.

"Thank you for sharing, Angry Crow!"

OOPS No 1

MONSTERS IN PARADISE

Outtakes and Other Perilous Stuff: Number One

By: Curtis Wildcat

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The next chapter's not as heavy with the humor as prior ones have been, so here's an omake. This would've been considered canon to the story had common sense not won out (yeah, I know, there's no common sense in Gensokyo and all that); it's not an outtake, not really, but I just felt like being silly... eh, I give up. This is flat-out insane.

Following the omake I have a message for the more immature and disrespectful denizens of the Internet who might have chosen to read my fanfiction over the past fifteen-odd years. Those of you who don't fit into that category, along with those who do but feel that they don't, aren't aware of it or otherwise don't care about their behavior, are welcome to ignore it. It has no bearing on the story anyway.

It was a general gathering of Gensokyo's most infamous, and the Hakurei shrine grounds were full. Humans, youkai and their Pokémon were clustered together, laughing and conversing with each other.

Patchouli was one of the few who didn't look pleased to be there. She seemed shaken by something, and she didn't look anyone in the eyes. It didn't take long for Marisa to notice this. "Oi, Patchy. Are you gonna tell us what's up? Like, *today,* maybe?"

"..."

"Marisa, if she doesn't want to talk about it, leave her alone," Remilia warned, relaxing in the shade of her parasol. "She's been like this to me too, you know."

"...No, Remi, she's probably right. It isn't right of me to just keep it to myself," Patchouli reassured her, steeling herself. "I just don't like to think about it, is all."

"So, what's the problem?" asked Marisa, sipping her drink.

"...I had a bad dream yesterday evening. I fear it may be a sign of terrible things to come."

"Ooh. Now this I *have* to hear." Marisa leaned forward with an interested smile.

"Swa. Swad *loooon* ," Patchouli's ever-present Pokémon told her, a rare smile on its face.

Yeah, what she said. Tell us! Shiver told her delightedly, eager to hear about it as much as Marisa was.

"Alright. It's like this..."

Everyone close by leaned in to listen, conversations fading away.

"...The first thing I knew was that I was wearing a sparkling white dress, with a veil before my eyes. There were these wooden benches around me, with all of you sitting in them... then this clueless fat guy in a black suit walks up to me and puts a ring on my finger."

That was not a tremor you felt. That was around fifty jaws hitting the ground all at once.

"You were getting *married?!"* Remilia shrieked, shocked. "I wasn't aware that you were in love with anyone!"

"That's the thing. I'm *not,* " Patchouli told her, looking offended at the very idea. "I have never sought a romantic attachment with anyone, nor will I ever. I'd sooner be plague-stricken."

"I don't know..." Akyuu could be heard muttering. Those next to her could tell she didn't believe the librarian. "I seem to recall our meeting ending prematurely because- - -"

"That didn't happen," Patchouli bit out, interrupting her. "That... did not... happen. Anyone who claims otherwise will- - -"

A Rapidash neighed, galloping up the shrine steps and halting close by. The shirtless man seated on the imposing horse gave them an appraising look, then dropped a few bills into Reimu's donation box and left the same way he arrived. The miko, while silently pleased at the offering, found herself staring at the gate and wondering where the music had come from.

"...Well," Mokou was heard to say, a bit caught off guard. "That was strange, even for here."

"Who *was* that man?" Remilia wondered. "I mean, seriously- - -...Pache? Hey, Pache?... Pache!"

Patchouli didn't hear her, her face burning red and her breath catching in her throat. "...will... be... absolutely right," she finished. "...Cirno? Where... are you?"

"Yeah? What do you want?" the ice fairy asked, flying on over. Croagunk followed her, one hand poised to Poison Jab her if she got out of line.

"If you... can hold... your hand... right there..." Patchouli gestured at her forehead. "...for five minutes... you can have... Marisa's snacks."

"Hey!"

Not one to turn down a free dessert, Cirno followed her instructions and held her hand against Patchouli's forehead. "An impromptu ice pack," Eirin commented from the other side of the shrine grounds. "Not too bad."

Remilia 'hmm'ed thoughtfully to herself, taking in the situation, and regarded Patchouli worriedly. "I hope you'll be alright. If I didn't know better I'd say you had a crush on that man."

Thankfully, Nitori was on hand to run damage control after that was said. Reimu would admit later that it was the first time she'd ever seen a fairy catch fire just because someone was blushing.

I love acronyms.

I can understand if some of you who have read my stories don't like them (I know you're out there; I can hear you swearing at me). Seeing as how I've never once claimed to be a quote-unquote "good" writer, that everyone has their own tastes and that my imagination and style march to the beat of their own drummer, it's inevitable that this will come about. The thing is this: if you're going to complain about my stories, whether in front of me or behind my back, then be a man (or woman, case depending) about it and ***be civil.*** If you have to express your opinions via trolling, insults and/or profanity, you're probably not the sort of person who should have access to the Internet (or any sort of technology, for that matter); but if you can state your concerns in a calm and polite manner, I can address them to the best of my ability. That is all I ask.

As my mission statement on my Author's Bio states, there's plenty of things that I'm bad at and only *one* thing that I'm good at, at least as far as my writing is concerned. That stems from my approach to said writing: I'm not out to write a good story (that's more of a bonus than

a primary objective), but rather to make myself and others laugh where the subject matter would allow it, even if I feel dissatisfied with my efforts years down the line. For a mind that's half asleep during the best of times, that's all that matters to me. If you can't respect that, then maybe you ought to find something else to read.

My stories aren't for those who don't like them. They're for those that *do.* Something for you to remember, kids.

I apologize for the rant, everyone. I'll get back to writing the story now.

This is a message for those who deal with depression to varying degrees, including myself:

Never give up. Never surrender.

Thank you, and ciao mein for now.

Koishi

MONSTERS IN PARADISE

Chapter Seven

By: Curtis Wildcat

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Three things, people. **One:** Breaking the pattern set in previous chapters, only one character will have the spotlight in this chapter. Yukari's portion here won't be anywhere near as long as hers, comparatively speaking, so I've decided to make up for it by giving her the entire eighth chapter to work with. **Two:** I'd like to warn the readers that I've never been good at keeping things a secret for long; you'll see what I mean when you get there. In a related issue, there might be a slight decrease in the chapter's humor level. **Three:** this chapter's the biggest one yet, most of it caused by actual plot development, so getting a snack or something might be prudent. If you live in Michigan by some chance, then I suggest a glass of Faygo.

Locate the reference to *Precocious* and procure a Cupcake of Bliss. The bake sale is science!

Swish. To and fro.

Children running and playing. Tussling and laughter.

Here, not here. There, not there. Everywhere, not everywhere. Nowhere, and yet nowhere. A conundrum with a sealed mind.

On a whim, she twirled a little boy's hair and darted away. She listened and gave a laugh, however hollow, when the boy's father

couldn't find his son's unexpected playmate.

She never fretted, or if she did she had no memory of it. She never gave in to anger. She never cried with sorrow. Joy and pain were like sunshine and rain... they left and went away without a thought edgewise, always moving on and leaving her behind.

Acting on impulse was the key to her existence, to feeling *alive,* and Koishi wouldn't have it any other way.

"Strange. A being with an empty head. This is very unusual."

She ignored the faint voice that she heard, dismissing it as a long-forgotten memory. She shuddered, not wanting to relive those times, and lazily flew off in a random direction.

"You."

The voice came again when Koishi was somewhere over the Forest of Magic. She wasn't ready to believe that someone was really trying to talk to her. This wasn't like before; the Mask of Hope she once possessed had long since lost all its power. She was not taking part in a popularity contest. There was nothing in her mind. It was sealed away. Gone.

"You down there."

This time, the voice gave Koishi pause. She drifted to a stop and watched the cloudless skies for any sign of someone approaching her. "Hello?" she called. "Hello? Are you there, Hello-san?"

"I am here."

Without knowing why, Koishi was quietly in awe of this strange, wonderful voice. "Why are you talking to me? You shouldn't be able to try..." she stated, her voice trailing off.

"Would you be interested perhaps... in visiting a new world? A world that I am in the midst of creating?"

A new world to explore. Another place to go. Events to see. Children to play with.

"I am looking for people. People like you... who have no use for the complexities of the mind. People who can appreciate without appreciating. Have I caught your interest?"

"I go where my feet carry me, where the wind delivers me," Koishi said to the talking air. "Half the time I can't tell where I'm going, half the time I don't try, and I have many random encounters along the way... but I go regardless." A quirky smile. "Let me see it. I will walk. I *must* walk."

"Then walk. Take those first steps. See the world that I want to change for the better, that shall be remade in its entirety...

...the world of Pokémon."

A rainbow road stretched out before her. Not knowing where it led but not really caring, Koishi walked down that road to the destination that awaited her. Along the way she hopped forward four steps and skipped to the left three, vanishing into a side tunnel and dodging the blue shell that exploded behind her.

"...Not what I had in mind, but maybe that will do."

Mismagius, unseen beneath the artwork of yellows, oranges and reds that covered the towering trees, watched as the portal shrunk and disappeared. Remembering how she had arrived at Gensokyo, the immature ghost Pokémon flew off back to Marisa's home to notify her of what she'd witnessed.

This one has no detectable knowledge.

This one has no discernable willpower.

This one has no perceivable emotions.

Where did we go wrong? Did we miss one?

They had detected Koishi immediately when she had arrived. It was believed that they were the ones responsible for giving humanity those precious traits many centuries ago, and it was truer than even the most well-versed people realized; not only could they sense the levels of each quality in passers-by, but they could tell when someone was severely lacking... or in Koishi's case, *seemed* to be lacking... in one of those things. To the Lake Trio, who overflowed with their gifts to humanity, the blank spot that the satori represented stood out to them like a Kecleon's stripe...

...even if it *did* take precious minutes to get her properly visualized without risking her disappearance. That was something they didn't fully understand yet.

What should we do? Azelf asked his counterparts in a telepathic conference. *Should we leave her be?*

Mesprit added its two cents. *Forcing her to accept us would not be right. Why should we bother her?*

She is not human. Uxie shook his head. *No human on this earth possesses the kind of power that I'm sensing. Her mind is cut off, and even now I am having some difficulty focusing on her... as if there is something keeping us from believing that someone is there. Do you see what I mean?*

Azelf followed Uxie's line of sight- - -or lack thereof- - -to where Koishi was stepping lightly down the side of Mt. Coronet, humming an off-key tune and completely ignoring the frigid air around her. The Pokémon native to the area, all of which were the kind that intercepted any intruders they met, somehow kept missing her; she even passed within a meter of a Weavile without it even knowing she was there. *That external eye. That's the source of her power.*

Uxie nodded. *That's what I feel. There's no real method to her actions, and no way to tell what she's thinking... because she's not thinking at all. Everything is done subconsciously. Amazing.*

Uxie, is there any reason why that eye is closed? Mesprit wanted to know.

I can't say, not without asking her directly.

I don't like this, Azelf muttered. *Something is going to happen soon, whether by her hand or someone else's. Would we be able to get understandable answers from her if we left her psyche alone?*

Mesprit pondered this for a minute. *It's possible that living the way she does was her choice. If the decision were left up to me, I would leave her be.*

There's something else. Uxie's head turned away from Koishi. It was now aimed directly at Mt. Coronet, but it wasn't clear what the examination was supposed to find. *That energy spike we felt when she appeared. It has been a long time since we've experienced its power, but...*

She was brought here, Mesprit correctly discerned. *She is not from this world.*

The trio continued to watch as Koishi reached the bottom of Mt. Coronet and waved hello at a week-old Meditite. "Today's the first day of the rest of your life," she greeted it. "Enjoy it to the full, okay?" With that said she lifted off and glided away from the mountain's base, unheeding of the Meditite's awestruck reaction to her flight.

In the far distance, a plethora of buildings of various sizes were barely visible on the horizon. *She's going to one of Sinnoh's major population centers. Would her unconscious activity serve her in good stead there?* Azelf asked at last, eyebrows raised a little as he watched the satori fly.

We will need to watch her, Mesprit decided. *Even if it means doing something that she won't want. We must wake her up and hear what she has to say. If all goes well, we might get a clue as to why we were summoned here today.*

Coming to a mutual agreement, the Trio winged (so to speak) away from the mountain and descended towards Koishi. Their eyes, indeed their very beings, shined brightly as they circled above; their bodies shimmered and disappeared to prevent onlookers from noticing them.

"A world that he wants to change for the better..." Koishi whispered as she flew down the grassy path a while later. "A world... of Pokémon? Those funny little things?" She grabbed a few berries from trees alongside the path, eating as she went and smiling at the taste.

There were many creatures and a handful of humans that she'd seen over the course of the morning, although "vice versa" wasn't typically in play. A flaming monkey and a hilariously oversized nose were having a strange sort of duel, being commanded by kids; it was nothing like the Spell Card combat she was used to. Plenty of animals, whether they be nesting or going about their lives. At one point she'd sped up and gained altitude to shoot past a flock of grayish-brown and white birds, disturbing and confusing them when they didn't know why were being bothered. More assorted kids here and there, whether they were travelling the same path or doing something else. None of them saw her.

It was a quaint little world, and an equally quaint way to live. There wasn't much difference between this world and the one Koishi had just left. Never mind the battling animals, the kids out and about without supervision, the weird fruits. Never mind the grassy plain and dirt road giving way to gigantic dwellings, colorful establishments, and paved streets. And never mind the presence of thousands of people in a given area, the most she'd seen in a long time. No, there was no difference at all.

"And if that's true, I'll eat my hat. Mix it with love and make the world taste delicious... and now I'm getting hungry. Thank you, Mister Singer."

Koishi continued to talk to herself as she went along, slowing down her pace from a slow flight to a slow walk. Her stomach rumbled a little, and her nose caught a scent: somewhere nearby was the source of something delicious-smelling. Deciding to help herself to whatever it was, she steered herself in that direction.

Along the way, Koishi passed a white squirrel embroiled in a conversation with a blue and yellow mouse. She shook her head as she left them behind. "Something wrong with them? They look fine to me. Why does he want to change them?"

They're happy. Why does he think they shouldn't be?

She froze in mid-step, distracted. "Huh?... Did I say something?... I don't remember doing that..."

The sound of clawed feet hitting a cement path reached her ears. Yet, something much more important kept her attention diverted. Did *I say something? That's cra- - -...No! I can't be actually* thinking *these things-*

"Hey! Get out of the road, you crazy kid, or I'll run you down!"

Something interrupted Koishi in mid-thought, which in itself was both a novelty and a fearful concept. "I'm not carrying hope anymore," she told herself. "Why is someone trying to get my attention?" *And how did I know that?* ...

She turned around just in time to see a masked man on a three-headed bird bearing down on her, somehow knowing that it really *was* going to run over if she didn't clear out of the way. She swerved to the left, letting herself maneuver around the bird like she had done in similar situations many times before...

...or so it should've worked out. Koishi's perception of the world sharpened, becoming crystal clear; her brain was fully functioning again, as it had been when she and her sister had first come into being. Normally this would have been a good thing... except that she had a good reason for living her life in a blur, for not being fully aware. The suddenness of having her mind reawakened, including the deluge of thoughts from everyone on the street (least of all herself), threw off her balance and reaction time, the latter by just half a second...

"Drioooooo!"

"Wha- *oooof!"*

...which was enough for the bird to plow right into, over, and past her without any sort of drop in speed. Koishi stayed conscious long enough to count the swirling birdies over her head, figuring there to be five, then shut her eyes- - -all three of them- - -and blacked out against the pavement, the impact and the bird's taloned feet conspiring to do her in.

Azelf? Uxie?

Yes, Mesprit? the two of them asked.

It's time we added a new word to our mighty lexicon.

What would that be?

"Oops."

The three of them shook their heads, silently agreeing that this mistake in timing was one thing humanity should never know about them. They had mystique to maintain.

Elsewhere in the city, there had been a theft in progress.

The owner of a cozy little shop had special-ordered a set of Poké Balls custom made in Johto, straight from the hands of a well-known craftsman. Upon receiving them he had made preparations to raffle them off in several days.

Of course, someone couldn't wait that long. A troublemaker that had been causing trouble in Hearthome City off and on for the last two years snuck into the shop. While the owner's back was turned, he quickly swiped the assorted Poké Balls but was spotted on his way out the door. Wanting to escape before the police caught up to him, he took out his Dodrio, seated himself and ordered it to hurry off as fast as it could.

The thief had winced just a little when Dodrio had run the girl over, but he justified it to himself by saying that she should've known better than to have wandered into the middle of the road. Besides, Pokémon trainers were a hardy lot; she'd recover given time, and if anything she'd helped his cause by temporarily taking some of the cops off his tail. They'd have to check and see if she was alright and get her to the hospital if she wasn't, and by the time they could return to the chase the thief would hopefully be long gone. Sadly (for him), the outcome was not the one he desired.

By the time that the thief was caught an hour later, the girl was forgotten about entirely.

Joy and pain.

...Are like sunshine... and rain.

That was Koishi's first thought as she woke up. Of course the fact that she was actually *thinking* disturbed her, but she set that aside for the moment and took in her surroundings instead.

She found herself in a nice comfortable bed, similar in size to the one she had back at her sister's palace. Her eyes flicked around, taking in the overall brightness of the room and the large window

above and to her left. A five-drawer counter, painted gray with a vast multitude of miniscule black and white specks, was set up along the far wall. A vent near the ceiling blew warm air into the room, and some momentary curiosity bade her to look at it. "It was cold earlier, so I know I was outside when I was hit... did someone bring me in here?" she asked herself.

-/-She's recovering quickly. Very *quickly. That's... are there any levels beyond "bizarre"?-/-*

A nice-looking chair next to her bed, upon which her clothes were folded and piled up. A quick look at herself told her that she had on some kind of soft two-piece cyan-colored outfit, although she felt that whoever put it on her must have had difficulties dealing with her Third Eye and the artery-like tendrils that connected it to her. "They must never have seen it before," she whispered, too quiet for anyone- - -if there was anyone close by- - -to hear. "Is that good or bad?"

-/-It's a remarkable recovery she's going through... still, I should ask the doctor if we should keep her here the next few days.-/-

Koishi didn't need her sight to know that there were bandages and traces of ointment on her stomach, chest, and face, or that there were still occasional jabbing pains there. She wasn't worried. She was a youkai, a satori. Injuries like those were nothing, and they would probably be gone before too long. Common sense (of all things) told her to stay still and let herself recover, though, so she heeded its guidance and remained in bed.

-/-All I want to do is celebrate, every time we've been together its been great. ...Man alive, that song's catchy.-/-

-/-There was no identification or Pokédex on her. Is she an orphan? ...No, that doesn't make sense...-/-

The *physical* injuries were nothing, anyway...

"Those... those voices," Koishi whispered, giving them her full attention. "Why am I hearing those voices? What's..." She sat up and looked down towards her Third Eye, focusing on it directly...

...and saw it wide open for the first time in ages. Her literal heart skipped a beat as her uneasiness grew.

-/-May as well check on her again and see how she's doing. Maybe she's awake, maybe not.-/-

-/-Koishi...-/-

-/-They're thinking of creating a hockey league in Sinnoh? Took them long enough.-/-

A young silver-haired woman in a white uniform and carrying a thin board of some kind entered the room, distracting the satori. Both the woman and the giant purple butterfly on her shoulder seemed pleasantly surprised when Koishi was seen to be awake. "Ah! Good afternoon. Are you- - -"

"- - -doing alright? I think I am," Koishi said reflexively, then flinched and quickly shut her mouth in the hope that her faux pas hadn't been noticed.

It was a bit late for that; her visitor was already giving her an odd look. The woman shrugged it off after a few moments and spoke again. "Well then, excellent. You probably know why you're in the hospital, I'm assuming... um...?"

-/-He says he loves me? He doesn't even know me!-/-

-/-Got a tune in my skull, and it ain't goin' away. Dig it.-/-

"Koishi Komeiji, Moon-san. Because I didn't have enough sense to get out of the road before a bird flattened me... The police summoned an ambulance, whatever those are, to take me to a hospital and get me cleaned and treated... I'm older than I look, I

don't have any Pokémon, and you want to get some mochi during your lunch break." The answers to questions both spoken and unspoken flew past her lips. With a mortified squeak she clamped both hands over her mouth as the nurse looked put off.

It's happening to me again...mouthing off before they're done speaking what they're thinking. This is why I didn't like being a satori!

Bad memories that her closed heart had allowed her to ignore for centuries began to resurface, and she shuddered violently; even as they came to mind, a developing cacophony of thoughts made her squeeze her eyes shut. Koishi ignored the woman when she spoke to her again, the words "treatment" and "recovery" the only ones to get past the questions she was asking herself. *What's going on? Why is this happening to me* now *? Did the voice that lured me here set some kind of trap? Why me?*

-/-What's wrong with her? Is she sick?-/- "Miss?" the woman asked, suddenly alarmed. "Something wrong with you? What is it?"

-/-He mixed Cheri Cola with Oran juice? That's just wrong. *-/-*

-/-I wonder what's for dinner tonight?-/-

-/-My dear Drifblim will teach that rookie a thing or two! Oh-hohohohohoho!-/-

"No..." Koishi whispered. "Come on... Get these images out of my mind! Stop thinking at me!"

-/-What is she talking about? And what in blazes is that purple thing connected to her? Children these days, always doing their own thing...-/- "Miss? Miss!"

-/-Koishi...-/-

-/-These Poffins are delicious! I'm getting the recipe!-/-

-/-Who are you calling so small that he gets lost in the seat cushions looking for change?!-/-

"I don't want to hear them! I was happier not hearing them!" Koishi tried to force shut her Third Eye, but whatever it was that had opened it was being stubborn: the eyelid refused to move. She ducked her head, covering it with her arms. "I don't want people to hate me! I don't want anyone near me! I will not relive that past again!"

An alarmed gasp. *-/-Something's seriously wrong with her!-/-* "Butterfree, get the doctor in here immediately! Miss, please calm down! Listen to me!"

-/-Koishi!-/-

-/-So I want to do something like this, but with more success.-/-

-/-Okay... I didn't know the Champion was an ice cream addict.-/-

"They're everywhere... it's happening! It's happening all over again! The thoughts... the thoughts won't leave me alone," Koishi whimpered. "Please, just leave me be!"

-/-KOISHI KOMEIJI, STOP YOUR WHINING AND LISTEN WHEN WE'RE TALKING TO YOU!-/-

Like a slap to the face, the mental scream shocked Koishi into silence. She looked up, seeing but only faintly hearing members of the hospital staff clustering around her, talking to her and going about their business. Someone out there could hear her, and as she waited for them to continue speaking she noticed that the thoughts in the area were slowly being smothered by an enigmatic presence... *No, there's three of them...*

Three of them. They had to have been sprites, or at least some sort of small youkai the like of which she wasn't familiar with. They were actively blocking the space around her Third Eye with some sort of

strange power, both keeping her from closing it and lowering the volume of all the thoughts around her: she could still hear bits and pieces of them, but they were mostly lost beneath her own heartbeat. No one else in the room seemed to have detected the sprites...

And why does everything aside from them look so... gray?

-/-You are *Koishi Komeiji, are you not?-/-* asked one of the sprites. The pink one, probably.

Even as she nodded, Koishi made her displeasure known. "Why? Why did you wake me up? I was just fine as I was. Why are you subjecting me to this again? And who are you? Tell me!"

None of them seemed bothered by her going on the offensive. *-/-Because we seek answers from you, child,-/-* the yellow sprite answered calmly. *-/-Coherent ones, free of empty-headedness and haze. We want no-nonsense replies, and we will have them.-/-*

Koishi started to speak, but the blue sprite was a step ahead. *-/-We already know that you are not human, Komeiji. There are few, if any, humans in the world that can survive for long with your sort of mental disability, and none that can survive on solely subconscious actions. ...All that, and you have an extra eye where it doesn't belong.-/-*

"It's not a disability," Koishi told them coldly, ignoring that last comment. "I made myself that way. Now before I tell you anything more, answer my question: who are you?"

-/-When we first flew, people gained the ability to express themselves...-/-

-/-...to learn...-/-

Blue. *-/-...and to act. Azelf, embodiment of willpower.-/-*

Yellow. *-/-Uxie, embodiment of knowledge.-/-*

Pink. *-/-Mesprit, embodiment of emotions.-/-*

All three of them clustered together and spoke as one: *-/-And we, young one, are Pokémon. That shall never change.-/-*

Koishi could feel one of the people in the room gently pushing her back into the pillows, could see her saying something. She almost wished that the "embodiments" would let her hear the humans' voices, if only to confirm whether or not they really wanted to help, but it was not to be. "...You're right... perhaps we *do* need to talk. But you're going to start things off." Her green-eyed glare focused on each of them in turn. "Starting with why I was forced awake when I was minding my own business."

-/-And your business was...?-/- Uxie asked, a thin eyebrow arching.

The satori opened her mouth to say something... only to find that she didn't have an adequate answer. "Um... ...uh... I guess I was just hungry," she confessed, letting her hands rest on her Third Eye's tendrils. "...But you still shouldn't have done that! Do you have any idea how much it hurts to think about the past? *Do you?* "

-/-Many apologies, young one,-/- Mesprit said, closing its eyes for a few moments. *-/-But what we have to ask you about is of great importance to us. We would have left you alone if it were not, I assure you.-/-*

From what little passed through the Third Eye's temporary shielding, Koishi could tell that their words were truthful. For the moment, at least, she decided to trust them. "Then talk to me. I'll try to answer your questions to the best of my ability."

-/-Alright. ...How was it that you came to be in this world?-/- Azelf looked at its fellows for a moment, nodded, then rephrased its question. *-/-To be more precise,* who *was it that brought you into this world?-/-*

Koishi hesitated. The edges of Azelf's question had been lined with wariness and caution. Thinking back, the voice that had invited her here had said that he was looking for people who could "appreciate without appreciating". Aside from that, the statement that continued to lurk in the background was that he wanted to change this world for the better, to re-create it.

To re-create it... with her still on it, maybe? That didn't sound very promising. Some might've thought of it as akin to gaining the power of a god, but Koishi didn't want any of it. Meeting new people around Gensokyo, taking care of what few pets she had back home in the Underground, and spending time with her new friends at the Myouren Temple... she liked being able to do those things, and wanted to do them as much as possible. Sure, she could become one of the mightiest beings in the world, but at what cost?

And what of the worst-case scenario: one where re-creating the planet meant not unlimited power, but a gravestone forever unmarked?

Now that she had complete control of her brain once more, she realized that she had stumbled onto something big far, far from home. Something that would potentially prevent her from seeing her friends again... and from seeing her older sister again, her sole surviving family.

Appreciate without appreciating?

Not a snowball's chance in an onsen.

...But none of that changed the fact that she was still hungry.
"Excuse me, you three... but before we continue, could I talk to these people real quick?"

While Koishi and the three Pokémon conversed, the hospital staff assigned to her- - -not seeing the Lake Trio at all- - -worked to insure

that their patient was doing alright. Their confusion at the presence of her Third Eye remained, and they wondered why she suddenly freaked out... only for her to snap out of it just as quickly. Afterwards her lips were slowly moving, as if she were trying to speak, but no words were audible to them.

They were just starting to believe that her damage was more mental than physical when Koishi finally spoke aloud, refraining from sitting up in her bed. "Excuse me, but... my stomach's telling me that it's lunchtime. Could I have something to eat, please?" she asked, covering her mouth with one hand as soon as she finished.

The woman she'd originally spoken to breathed a quiet sigh of relief, her Butterfree following suit. *Whatever issues she has, they don't seem to be bothering her at the moment. Still curious about that bizarre eye, though. It looks so real...*

Nonetheless, this was a strange case in their eyes, and it would only get stranger by the time it was done. What patient willingly asks to have something to eat at a *hospital?* The poor girl didn't know what she was getting into.

In any event she wanted lunch, and lunch she would have.

Distracted as they were, none of them saw the look Koishi directed at the woman before everything went gray again. She'd heard the woman's last thought and she wanted to give her some sort of answer, figuring she owed her that much after her freakout, but she knew it wasn't the time for that. There was something she still needed before she could talk to her.

Courage.

Somewhere, in a place where time, space and reality had no hold, the voice that Koishi had dubbed "Hello-san" spoke again to itself as it watched events unfold.

"... ..."

A quiet beep from the depths of the darkness. The temperature dropped several degrees as the source of the voice grimaced. *This will not do.*

"... ..."

The repetitive *krrr-ink* of a rotary telephone being manipulated.

"Your job and hers are almost done. Once this is finished, I will have what I need and you will be free to do as you wish. Send Hearse the signal, and I will handle the rest."

The voice that answered him was male, calm, cold and flavored with the slightest touch of arrogance. "You're a very cruel man, but because of your wonderful charisma we will follow your orders one last time. I will hold this honor in my heart forever. Good-bye, Hello-san."

The phone hung up, leaving him to wonder how much of that reply was meant to be taken seriously and how much was sarcasm.

-GAP-

It was remarkably easy trying to locate Yukari. Before leaving Mauville, Merril had made a quick stop at an abandoned storage facility that the Violet Vigoroths used as a meeting place, borrowing a bicycle that had taken every member of the gang to pay for. After that, all she needed to do was follow the wreckage west. She had to go through the cave instead of over it, so she had little choice but to try and evade the Whismurs she came across, but on the whole she made good time and rolled into Rustboro while Yukari and the Harrisons were having their discussion at Wally's pizzeria.

After satisfying her hunger urges and such, Merril sat down on a bench and popped open her laptop to see if anything had turned up regarding the cause of all that wreckage. Again when she found what

she was looking for, the improbability of what had happened staggered her mind. *That whole mess happened because that Yukari lady lost control of her Mach Bike? What's that thing made out of, unobtainium? Bicycles are not meant to deal or take that much damage!*

Merril put her laptop on Standby and put it away, slouching in her seat. *Well, whatever. The trail ends at the library. If I can find an excuse to meet up with her, I can get my information straight from the Ponyta's mouth. After that, we'll see how things roll...*

An odd feeling passed over Merril, but it quickly passed. *Strange. I just had the weirdest urge to sample some red wine. What in blazes for? I'm still underage, so I've never touched the stuff...*

...Eh, whatever. It ain't important.

Deciding she'd had enough rest, Merril got up and gathered up her belongings before walking the few short blocks between her and the libary.

-GAP-

When the group returned from lunch, Amber was immediately set upon by several browsing trainers who had trouble finding some missing books. Before she left to assist them, she reluctantly suggested to Yukari that if she needed help finding anything, "just ask my daughter. She knows the Dewey Decimal System better than my assistants do." Ellen muttered something about "...indoctrination" and "...free range children", but she didn't protest.

Although it wasn't yet clear to the overseer why Amber had been loath to go about her work...

Although her inability to ride a bike didn't speak much for her experience, Yukari hadn't lived this long without knowing the ins and outs of a library. She gravitated towards an aisle of books that dealt with mythology and the islands' histories, selecting a few and taking

them back to Ellen's desk to read. It was nice to have some *quiet* company now and then; Midori, recalled to her Poké Ball, didn't count.

Amber returned to her desk twenty minutes later, shaking her head. She seemed a bit relieved for a moment when she saw them, but it quickly changed to irritation. "I don't get it," she was muttering. "I just don't get it."

Yukari didn't look up. "Don't get what?"

"I brought in a book written by Professor Oak and properly filed it away this morning," Amber complained. "Brand new, had a plastic cover and bar code on it, stamped it and entered it into the system, everything. Out of the books those people were looking for, that was the only one I couldn't locate. It's infuriating."

"Maybe someone upstairs took it," Yukari suggested, not truly interested in the librarian's problems. This section on the legends of Dialga and Palkia was much more entrancing.

"That was my first thought, but there's no one upstairs aside from a few kids from the Trainer's School and one of my assistants. None of them reported seeing the book."

As with Yukari, Ellen didn't look up from her reading material as she spoke. "...Might have just been misplaced. ...You sometimes get someone who takes a book or two, then ignores the sign saying: 'Do not re-shelf these books. Staff will replace'."

"I checked that entire aisle, Ellen." Amber leaned on her desk, resting her head on her arms. "I found nothing. Sure, they might have stuck it in another aisle by accident, but is anyone really *that* forgetful? Surely they can tell the difference between Pokémon care and human genetics."

"A wise person considers every possibility, Mrs. Harrison." Page flip. "Even the obscure ones."

Amber snorted softly. "I'd call that paranoia."

Yukari smiled the smile of the ancients. "In my experience, there's no such thing as paranoia."

The librarian mistook the smile of the ancients for the smile of the entertained. In her defense there wasn't much difference between the two, at least where Yukari was concerned. "Look, Mrs. Yakumo- - -"

" *Miss* Yakumo. I never married."

"You don't know what you're missing. Anyway, I've done my part in trying to find it. I've already directed my assistants to notify me if they locate it. If it turns up, it will; if it doesn't, then I'll know soon enough- - -"

"...Alternatively," Ellen softly interrupted, "it could've been stolen. Our rogue bicyclist's entrance damaged the sensors, too. It would have been child's play for someone to sneak out unnoticed."

" *Rogue bicyclist?* " Yukari sniffed. "I beg your pardon?"

"...Look. Be happy that I didn't call you a *rouge* bicyclist, okay? Proper pronunciation and that."

"You're right. That would've been more insulting."

Twenty long seconds passed before Amber sighed and stood up, ignoring their odd remarks. " *Why* do you have to plant these doubts in my head, Ellen?" she complained as she left to take another look.

Yukari turned to the small girl, curious. "Okay, I'll bite. The library has sensors?"

"...Top of the line, straight from Devon. ...They're programmed to go off if someone walks out with a book without having it scanned at the front desk first. ...Most libraries in Hoenn have them now." Those brown eyes looked up at her. "...Level with me, Mrs. Yakumo- - -"

"I *said* that I never married, Ellen."

"... ...Could have fooled me. ...But regardless of honorifics, is it really true that you know nothing of Cyrus and Team Galactic?"

Yukari put down the book she'd been reading, thinking. She had been going to dispense the information to those willing to listen in the hopes that they would be able to help her in some way, like she had with Kevin and Harmony, but as long as she was here... "I'll answer your question if you answer one of mine."

"...Whatever it is, it's probably none of your business."

"Then your curiosity shall remain forever unsated." Yukari's eyes had a seemingly devious glint in them as she spoke, one which Ellen could not have missed.

"...It isn't as if it's a big deal to me. I'd just like to know. ...News reports out of Sinnoh about three months ago explained that there was a tremendous disturbance caused by Team Galactic at the region's highest peak." Ellen set her book down and fully focused on Yukari for the first time. "...Whatever it was, it was big. The news and the region's police were close-lipped on that topic, but what they *did* say indicated that Cyrus and those loyal to him were too dangerous to remain free. ...Team Galactic's top officers, sans Cyrus himself, were arrested and convicted on multiple charges." The child took a deep breath as she finished speaking, closing her eyes for a few seconds.

Yukari took those seconds to fully absorb what she'd been told. "I'm sure that's important somehow, but why should I be concerned with- - -...oh," she finished, looking down at where Ellen's finger was pointing:

Straight at the youkai's book, and the illustration of Sinnoh's legendary dragons of time and space splashed across its' pages. Yukari swallowed and nodded, realizing the lead that she'd been given. "Of course. ...Thank you, Ellen. I'll have to look into this some

more before I commit to anything, but I think I know where I'll be going once I have my license."

Another deep breath. "...So... your answer?"

Another smile, this one more congenial than the one Yukari had given Amber. "Bluntly, no. Before your mother brought them up, I had never heard of them. Satisfied?"

She could tell by looking at the child that no, she *wasn't* satisfied. But at the same time, she seemed happy enough to leave things at that for the moment. "... ...You had a question?"

"It's not important," Yukari said, picking up her book and continuing where she left off. "It's a bit personal, anyway. Think nothing of it."

Ellen's eyes narrowed. "...Ask me the question. *I'll* decide whether it's too personal to give an answer to."

"Suit yourself. Just remember that I warned you." The overseer again turned away from the book, waited until a scraggly-haired passer-by was out of earshot, then continued. "What's it like to be so... *different* from everyone else?"

It took Ellen a full minute to think over her response; when she finally answered, Yukari could detect the raw bitterness in that calm monotone. "...She told you, didn't she? Mother told you everything."

"Yes. Yes, she did."

Ellen rested both hands on her knees, staring down at the ground. "...Can I trust you with this? ...I mean *really* trust you with this? ...You're a complete stranger. We have your name and nothing more, and for all we know that name could even be *fake.* We're no fools; we know the myths surrounding your namesake, and we know that she vanished well before I was born. ...What makes you trustworthy?"

Yukari sniffed scornfully. "I resent that, *little girl.* An admitted manipulator I may be, and I have no qualms with lying if it will accomplish my goals, but never once in all the centuries I've lived have I ever lied about who I was. I have never needed to."

"...Centuries?..."

"As I told you both at the pizzeria, I am a youkai. I have outlived your ancestors, and I will outlive your descendants. You think I'm kidding?" Yukari bent down in her seat, bringing herself down to Ellen's level. "Look me in the eyes, child. One glance was all it took for you to decide that I wasn't 'good people', and rightfully so, but that was when all you knew about me was that I was a monstrous and lazy trickster. I have depths, the same as everyone else, and they are far deeper than someone as young as you can comprehend. Now check again, and tell me: in light of what we've talked about until now, *what do you see?"*

Another minute passed. To Ellen's credit, she neither protested Yukari's claims nor wilted under her stare. The overseer resisted the urge to grin. *If nothing else, this shows that she can't be accused of making any hasty decisions. ...Still, I sort of wish she would hurry it up. My time here is precious.*

Ellen finally sighed and got up from her chair, closing her book and holding it beneath her arm. "...This isn't the right place to hold a private conversation. Follow me upstairs, please," she intoned, gesturing towards the stairway even as she walked towards it.

Shrugging, Yukari did as she was asked.

The pounding of feet against the stairwell faded as the two of them made tracks for elsewhere. Eagerly, Merril- - -the passer-by that Yukari had witnessed earlier- - -lowered the technology magazine she'd been using to conceal her face and carefully stepped on up after them.

Amber approached her desk five minutes later, grumbling all the way. "Book's gone missing, can't find it anywhere, scoured the shelves until they..." She trailed off, glowering as she noticed that Ellen and Yukari's seats were empty. "...If this weren't a library, I'd scream right now."

Both of Amber's hands tightened into fists as she imagined assorted scenarios involving their disappearance, ranging from kidnapping to assault. She had barely known Yukari for four hours or so. She might have felt at ease enough to have a decent conversation with her, but she trusted no one aside from her family, assistants, and the gym leader to be alone with Ellen without disturbing her. She hadn't even wanted to help those trainers if it meant leaving her child alone with a stranger. *I should've known better. One lapse in judgment, and the woman walks off with my child! That cursed trickster!*

Amber's voice went from raspy to a cold hiss. "If that incorrigible woman does anything other than *talk* with my baby girl, there shall be a reckoning. *"*

With that utterance out of the way, she stormed off on a search of a more personal kind.

-GAP-

Somewhere within the Scarlet Devil Mansion's library, in an empty slot on a bookshelf normally reserved for Metal-element spells, a colorful light shined for a brief moment. When the light faded out, the missing book Amber had been looking for was in its place.

Koakuma entered the aisle a minute later with the intent to put away a certain tome that Patchouli had just finished with. Doing a quick double-take when she saw the book, she set the tome down and pulled it out for a quick look.

The book's cover had a plastic jacket over it that crinkled at the touch of her fingers. Judging by its width, the book was probably about 140 pages in size. She popped it open for a moment and took

note of the words ink-stamped on the first page: 'Property of the Rustboro Public Library, Hoenn Region'... and then she closed the book and saw the title emblazoned across the front.

"... *A Traveler's Guide To Pokémon Care.* ...By Professor Samuel Oak...?" A question mark appeared over Koakuma's head. "I wonder what this is doing here..."

The question mark shifted to an exclamation mark. "Wait... *Pokémon* care?!"

Quickly shoving the tome she'd come to put away into place, Koakuma flew off with her discovery in hand. Patchouli would know what to do with this.

-GAP-

The conference room that Ellen led Yukari to wasn't terribly big. There was a rectangular table, six wheeled chairs, and a digital clock and a Beautifly painting on opposite walls. White tiles bordered the green carpet that took up much of the floor space. Some old invitations for a party of some kind were scattered about the table. Large glass windows along the other two walls helped people see both into and out of the library.

The two sat across the table from each other. Ellen already had her book open, unwilling to make eye contact with the older woman. Yukari leaned onto the table and clasped her hands before her face. "Alright. Any particular reason for the secrecy? Our endless exposition isn't considered classified by the Pokémon League, you know."

"...They wouldn't believe this any more than my parents would."

"And why is that?"

"...Because it's completely unnatural. You know that as well as I do. If I told people about this, I'd be carted off to the nearest asylum."

"Is magic really seen in that bad a light around here?"

Eye contact was now achieved. "... ...Is that what I've been imagining? ...Terrific. Just terrific."

Yukari withdrew her fan from her sleeve and opened it, concealing her amused expression. "Do tell, young one. Do tell."

Ellen sighed. "...I *really* don't want to tell you this. I hope you know that."

"And I'd rather be sleeping in luxury right now. We all have to do things we don't want to do."

The child gave her a weird look. "...A day sleeper, are you?"

"You could say that."

There was a trace of amusement in Ellen's voice. "...That would explain a great deal."

Yukari frowned. "I don't want to know. Just start talking, please."

"...Little Miss No Fun," Ellen murmured, then cleared her throat when Yukari glared at her. "...Right. Let's see: how to explain..."

-GAP-

Yukari listened to it all: the imagery that ingrained itself into Ellen's mind, and the ability to discern the differences between them and call them what they were from infancy on... the boxed-in world that no library on Earth could hope to become... the conclusion that the girl had reached, that there was something not right about her intense drive to absorb everything there was to know but lacking the will to change that path... and the dreams she periodically had, seeing life through unfamiliar eyes. Everything she had seen had made the child wonder whether there was more to the world than what her limited perspective was telling her, and she yearned to see the rest of the world directly... but something was keeping her rooted

in Rustboro, right here in this library. Her "glass is half-empty" view of life was brought on by her frustration as a result.

Ellen finally stopped talking after a while. Unused to heart-to-heart conversations, she had eventually quit taking her time between sentences and just let the words pour out one after another. Once her explanation was done, she slumped against the table and focused entirely on trying to catch her breath.

The overseer already knew what had troubled the girl all her life, and she suspected it to be a similar case with that Blaziken trainer she'd met yesterday. Ellen was this world's analogue of Patchouli Knowledge, and she was receiving some of the feedback from the youkai's life course. It was irritating, but not impossible to deal with: Yukari had seen cases such as this enough times over her long life- - -not that they happened often- - -to know that tweaking the local subjects' boundaries a bit kept them separate from their counterparts elsewhere in reality, letting them go on with their lives without interference. She didn't have that option here, though, at least not while her boundary manipulation ability was still blocked.

Still... maybe I can do something for this child before I leave. At least it would give her something to keep her mind occupied, and I can start seeing what I can do about getting my out-of-character moments out of the way before *my quest ends.*

Yukari got up, walked around the table, and sat herself in the chair next to Ellen. "I had no idea that your life was getting to be so... bothersome," she said gently. "I'd assumed you liked reading just for the sake of reading. You're not the first person I've met with that hobby."

"... ...Nothing wrong with that." Ellen took another deep breath before continuing, turning to face the youkai. "...I love to read, no question about that. It's the 'not leaving Rustboro' part that bothers me, and having to fool my parents into thinking that there's nothing wrong."

Yukari tentatively palmed one of Ellen's hands, enclosing it in her own. The girl's eyes twitched minutely, the only hint that she'd been startled by this action. "Thank you for telling me this," Yukari told her. "Tell you what: I still have my research to do, but I'll help your mother think of something that will get you going before I leave town. Is that alright?"

"...You're not the first one to try," Ellen murmured, her head lowered. Her breath caught in her throat for just a moment. "...If my parents couldn't do it, the gym leader couldn't do it and the comic book shop guy couldn't do it, then how could you figure out what they couldn't?"

"Serperior, launch me!"

A toothed smile and a blunt statement. "For all of their talents, Ellen, they don't have the experience and know-how that I do." Yukari frowned. "Although I fail to see what the comic book shop guy has to do with any of this- - -"

The conference room's door, which had been partially shut but not secured, slammed open. Yukari jumped in surprise, not expecting anyone to enter, and turned her head...

...just in time to catch an eyeful of an outraged librarian before Amber plowed into her, elbows first. Ellen quickly hit the floor to keep them from slamming into her, watching as the momentum and force carried them to the other end of the table.

"Filthy beast!" Amber howled as she sat on Yukari's back and grabbed her arms at the wrists, keeping her from summoning Midori. "I should never have trusted you! You're nothing more than a miserable pedophile! If scum wore shoes, you'd be the scum on the scum's shoes!"

What? Wha...? How did she jump to that conclus- - -... ... ...oh. "Mrs. Harrison, this is hardly what it looks like..."

"Save it," Amber hissed as a human-sized snake-like Pokémon slithered into the room to observe the proceedings. "Ellen, are you alright? Get to the phone and get Officer Jenny back here. Serperior, make sure she gets there without any trouble."

Silence.

"Ellen? Did you hear me?"

Ellen's face sunk into her hand, a motion that- - -unknownst to them- - -was mimicked by the youth outside the room. "...You're embarrassing me, mother."

"What? Ellen, what are you talking about?"

"...She wasn't harrassing me, mother. I was just talking to her about something important. She was helping me focus and trying to cheer me up. I was never in any danger."

"...Huh?" Amber's face lost some of its ferocity. "You weren't? But she... you were..."

"...No," Ellen told her firmly as she sat back in her seat. "She wasn't. Just because my head was down, my breathing was off and she was gripping my hand, that does *not* mean that she was going to assault me. Didn't you bother to listen to what was being said at *all?"*

The rest of Amber's anger left her, and she could feel her face burning. Slowly she let go of Yukari's wrists and eased off of her, standing up and extending a hand to her. "Mrs. Yukari? I... are you alright- - -GEEEEP!"

The Serperior at the door gasped and recoiled, spooked by the aura it was feeling. Ellen stayed quiet, letting the nervous sweat on her brow speak for her.

Their surprised reactions were brought about by the expression Yukari had fixed on Amber as the youkai pushed herself to her feet,

her upper back aching from the ambush even as she ignored the librarian's offer of assistance. Her face was congenial and friendly, but it didn't take an astute observer to sense that she was just as angry as Amber had been just a minute before. "You know what will make me feel alright? A Pokémon battle. Outside. Before I lose my temper. As in *right now."*

Amber whimpered a little and shut her eyes in nervous frustration. "Why do I get myself into these situations?" she asked as she turned and walked out, recalling Serperior as she went. Yukari went after her, her smile now hinting more at anticipation than at anger.

Ellen got up, grabbed her book, and followed her as far as the door. "...Because your impulsiveness is a genetic trait?" she offered helpfully. "Grandpa used to do the same thing..."

Her mother refused to answer that one.

A geek greeted a bibliophile.

"Hiya. I'm Merril."

"...Hello. I'm Ellen."

"Nice to meet ya."

"...Nice to meet you, too."

A few beats.

"So, want to watch two grown women argue like preschoolers?"

"...Sure. Sounds like fun."

And thus the seeds of a friendship were planted.

-GAP-

Even inside her Poké Ball, Midori could sense that a test was on the way. To the best of her memory she had never battled at all while she was living with the Laydens, and while she and Yukari were on the road she hadn't done more than go through a few refresher courses. To be able to test her strength against an actual opponent... the very thought of it filled her with a sort of nervous excitement.

Something that irritated the Ninetales was that she *still* hadn't gotten the hang of Energy Ball yet. She liked the idea of having an offensive edge over rock- and water-types, the latter of which were in plentiful supply in Hoenn. There was still something missing from it, though... one last piece of the puzzle that she hadn't grasped yet.

Dismissing that for now and waiting for the command that would free her for battle, Midori hoped that whoever she faced, it wasn't someone with a type advantage over her. Her self-esteem was low enough as it was.

Koishi didn't know too many things about hospitals and doctor's offices, but it didn't take her long to decide that she didn't like them. Sure, they meant well, but the quality of their food completely defeated the purpose of helping the patient recover. *Maybe I can get out of here by the end of the day. I never want to eat in this place again. Ever.*

While she ate, she'd had a mental dialogue with the three embodiments about their respective backstories. The events that led up to her sealing her mind away weren't discussed in detail, only alluded to; she'd made it clear that she didn't want to think about those things, much less talk to others about them. What she *did* do was explain her race's primary ability, and what she did to circumvent that; she thought it better to focus on those instead of on the opinions of those prone to anger and violence. Following that she described her encounter with Hello-san with as much detail as she could recall.

It was after that that she was reminded of something that she disliked thinking about almost as much as her past.

Koishi's chopsticks clattered onto her tray with a bit more force than was actually needed. She gave Azelf a long look, a hand tightening its grip on the blankets. *Mind repeating that little comment?*

You have a yellow streak as wide as the street you walked on, Azelf told her bluntly. *You're a coward. You care more about hiding from others' opinions than you do about dealing with them head-on.*

Of course I do, Koishi returned hotly. *I'm not a brave person. I'm not courageous. I never was. Until a few years ago, I was too afraid to breathe the open air because it would mean walking amongst people once again.*

What changed? Uxie gently prodded.

I had learned from my sister that a human had defeated one of her pets in battle. Koishi smiled, dismissing her anger for the moment in favor of a kinder memory that the embodiments had inadvertantly unlocked. *I ventured outside the Underground and went to a shrine on top of a mountain. There I fought against a girl dressed in red and white, and then against a friend of hers not long after. I gave it everything I had and then some, but I came out the loser anyway both times. ... The way they acted throughout, the things they said... something in me felt regret that I couldn't read their minds. I decided after that that maybe, just maybe, I could start meeting people again.*

At the very least you're no recluse, Mesprit admitted. *Thinking about that now, can you think of anything else you could have done in addition to that?*

The few people still in the room took the empty tray from her, told her something she couldn't hear- - -to which she just nodded- - -then dimmed the lights a little and left the room to let her rest. Koishi's smile left her as she closed her eyes most of the way. *You heard that*

conversation I was having with the nurse. How should *I deal with the anger of people who have realized that every thought they have, both good and bad, can't be kept to themselves anymore? I can't just keep myself from blurting those things out; my entire* race *is like that, and we've never been successful at restraining ourselves. Really, beyond closing my Eye again, what can I do besides giving in to my cowardice?*

The three embodiments turned aside from her, discussing this information quietly amongst themselves. The world around her regained its normal hues, and in the background Koishi could register a large number of thoughts overlapping each other. The farther away they were the quieter they got, but the sheer number of them was staggering; the tally inside the hospital- - -staff, patients and visitors all- - -was akin to some fair-sized villages that she'd been in somewhere in the past. She tried her best to ignore the majority of them, instead choosing to focus on ones that weren't far from the room.

As it turned out the first thought she clearly heard was that of the nurse's, Ms. Shayla Moon's. *-/-Let's see... we didn't get much out of her before she flipped out. ...She looks about 15 years old, but she said she's older than she looks... early 20s, maybe? That happens to my mother a lot too, so it's no big deal. ... No Pokémon, but that's not unusual either. Some people just choose not to have any for whatever reason...-/-*

A short pause, then a high-pitched squeal. Koishi figured it to be the mental voice of the butterfly that had accompanied the nurse, its language indecipherable. In a way, that was a relief; those who weren't well-versed in her native tongue were easier to deal with.

Ms. Moon's brain continued working. *-/-I've taken care of a lot of unusual people over the last few years, but this takes the cake. She answered every one of my questions before I could ask them, almost like she'd known all along. I'd thought those cords were attached to her shoes, but after they were removed they adhered themselves to her feet instead, like they'd been there all along... I don't even want*

to think about how I got those pajamas on her with those blasted things in the way. And then there's the eyes, and not just that one over her heart... I've seen people without sclera, but I've never seen anyone whose pupils and irises were both the same color.-/-

Koishi sweatdropped. *Without sclera? What the...?*

-/-This... nothing about this makes sense at all! I don't get it! I just don't get it! How am I supposed to offer adequate care if the details are giving me fits? Yeah, those punctures are treated already, but still! How am I supposed to explain this to anyone? Agghh! I wish someone would give me a hint! They didn't teach these things in medical school! I... oh hey, mochi. Just what I needed! Wonder if I should save any for Tea...-/-

Her head sunk. On the one hand, the nurse's willingness to help was genuine. On the other- - -...

The world turned gray again as the embodiments finished their conversation with each other and turned to her. *Koishi,* Azelf spoke, *what are your plans for the future?*

"Nothing concrete beyond returning home," Koishi admitted. "Although I don't think Hello-san's going to want me to leave. Why?"

We have an offer we'd like to make, Uxie spoke in all seriousness. *As you may have ascertained, there is a mystery afoot here in Sinnoh. If you're willing to help us solve it, we should be able to help you overcome that yellow streak.*

"...Is this mystery so important to you that you'd allow someone like me to help?" Koishi asked, unsure. "A stranger in all but name?"

Mesprit nodded. *Very much so, young one. Time and space are being tampered with, and we suspect that there is more than meets the eye. Those that* can *help us and would be willing to do so are not in a position to assist, so every set of eyes and every working mind that can assist us would be valued.*

"Time and space..." Koishi breathed, awed. "I'm no scholar, but... ..." She sat up and started to throw the blankets off her, flinching as the pain centered around her wounds reminded her that she wasn't fully healed yet. She stopped before she could get off the bed, hesitating."...Should things not work out with my fears...?"

Then your extra Eye will no longer be any of our business, Uxie reassured her.

The satori took a deep breath, slowly let it out, and nodded. "...Alright. I'll do it." She stood up, still unsure but figuring that as long as she was in it, she wasn't going to take the shortcut out of it. "Give me a few minutes to get ready."

While Koishi was finishing doing that, she searched around the room for something to write on. It took a bit of looking, but she was able to locate a few pieces of scrap paper and a pen in one of the counter's drawers. She spared a moment to look at the pen in wonder, wondering how they got the ink inside of it, then dismissed her curiosity and got to writing.

She felt bad leaving the hospital early and leaving her nurse in the lurch. For all that Ms. Moon was frustrated and upset at things deep down, she was an honest-hearted individual and sought to do her job as best as she could. Koishi didn't want to depart from the facility without giving her at least *some* sort of explanation for why things were the way they were. She deserved better than that; the satori made a note to herself to return someday- - -hopefully remembering to eat *before* visiting the hospital- - -and explain things in further detail. Perhaps the day would come when- - -...

An ominous hiss-like whoosh.

Koishi, behind you! Azelf barked in warning- - -...

She dropped the note and whirled around without questioning the command, heart danmaku slung from her hands as she turned. The

armored intruder, whoever it was, sidestepped left and let the bullets disperse against the wall- - -...

The world abruptly regained its color. Koishi hissed between her teeth at the myriad thoughts again tap-dancing through her head, and she noted the three unconscious embodiments, their illusions broken and their bodies held by- - -...

A quick flash of white at the base of her neck, and a paralyzing sensation. Her eyes widened just for a moment before she crumpled unceremoniously to the floor, wondering why she hadn't seen it coming in the moments before the blackness claimed her again.

The entire encounter had taken less than seven seconds.

Hello-san looked up only briefly as his hired hands arrived in his realm through a prismatic door, two of them carrying the Lake Trio and the third carrying the catatonic Koishi; a fourth figure, the Bisharp that had distracted her long enough for the capture to be carried out, dogged their heels. *"You know what to do,"* Hello-san uttered, returning his permanent glare to the vast nothingness.

From the perspective of those in this plane of reality, there wasn't much to look it around here. The room's ceiling was too far above everyone's heads to be visible, and the gray walls (what few there were) shifted to darker and darker shades the higher they went before finally becoming jet black. The floor was one gigantic marble tile, a dark bluish-green in color, stretching in all directions and vanishing into the distant horizon.

Three glass pillars, again stretching up to the ceiling and filled with a navy blue-shaded liquid, pieced themselves together out of thin air. It was in these that Hello-san's workers placed Uxie, Azelf, and Mesprit as they were waking up. The Pokémons' eyes flashed red, then returned to normal as the pillars' psychic buffers were activated, much to their frustration and surprise. To their credit, they recovered

from this quickly and turned to glare out at their captors, quivering in silent rage as they floated in the liquid.

If Hello-san and the shadowy forms had known *why* their eyes had glowed, they would've been much more cautious. Instead of thinking about that, they concerned themselves with securing their prize in place against a wall next to the pillars. They figured that the misshapen bindings, glittering in a way that suggested that they'd been crafted from the dust of a thousand jewels each, ought to be enough to hold her.

Koishi awakened while they were doing this, something which surprised everyone present; they had expected her to be incapable of action for at least another half hour. Not letting herself be distracted by her surroundings, she struggled wildly to free herself, decking one of her captors in its metal-like face with a rosy bullet before it could step away- - -...

A twisted energy emanated from those bindings that had been already secured, halting her movements. There was an unpleasant feeling like that of fire and ice simultaneously burning and freezing in her veins, making her cringe and grit her teeth. The captors underestimated Koishi once again, though; it would've been enough to put a human back under wraps, but as she'd demonstrated twice already today she was something other than human. The best the energy could do was keep her still long enough for the rest of the bindings to be secured.

"Your job is done," Hello-san affirmed, not looking at his helpers. *"You may go."*

The three shadowy humans nodded. One of them raised a Poké Ball and recalled Bisharp, who was still staring at Koishi in stunned disbelief from getting socked in the face by a *flower.* "Thank you, oh mighty Hello-san," he spoke; the satori could tell that he was laying the sarcasm on real thick. "You are certainly a credit to humanity. The simplistic way you tell people that they can leave, your can-do

attitude, your ability to inform others how high you want them to jump- - -"

"Please," Hello-san interrupted. Koishi couldn't get a distinct view of him no matter how hard she tried, but she got the impression that he was massaging his forehead. *"Just go, and tell your master that I do not want you on my doorstep again."*

"Certainly," the shadowed human said agreeably. He nodded at the others, and the trio teleported away in a flash of darkness.

The room was quiet for a handful of minutes; only the distant hum of machinery somewhere filled the air. Koishi tested her bindings, again cringing as that frozen flame iced her insides, and settled back disappointedly. *As if a bad day couldn't get any worse. Has reality taken sick leave or something?*

"You caused more trouble than I expected."

Koishi stayed quiet. After everything she'd seen and discussed, she didn't much like the idea of conversing with this strange being anymore.

"Letting you enter this world at Mt. Coronet was not the intended plan. I knew that those three..." At this Hello-san's glare centered itself on the Lake Trio. *"...would investigate. Mesprit, Uxie, and Azelf... they have just as much of a history with that mountain as they do with the lakes that they call home."* A shake of the head. *"But you had to enter this world through there instead of the far-off Kanto region, a land that lacks Sinnoh's rich history..."*

"You'd change your course too," Koishi softly informed him, "if you were pursued by a volatile kappa shell."

"...Point taken."

Again, a long silence. This time, Koishi was the one who broke it. "Tell me, Hello-san. Do you fancy yourself a god that can do

whatever he pleases? Is that why you want to change the world? Is that why you tricked me into following a path that would leave me far from home?"

Hello-san answered her calmly. *"I did not deceive you, Komeiji. You chose to walk that path of your own accord- - -"*

"- - -when I didn't know any better. That's a fancy way of saying 'yes'," Koishi told him calmly, for once quietly satisfied that he seemed taken back.

"Hold your tongue, girl. I don't just fancy *myself a god like you claim I do. When your might and knowledge surpasses that of the world as a whole, and when you reach a level beyond their understanding- - -"*

"- - -then it is only natural to call yourself a god," Koishi again finished. "Don't bother trying to explain that to me, for I just don't buy it. It takes more than intelligence and strength to make a god." Which was true, actually; Kanako and Suwako had those qualities, sure, but there were plenty of others in Gensokyo that had either one or both. It was the nature of their existence that left no doubt that they were gods, whereas Hello-san just felt *wrong.* Out the corner of her eye, she could see Mesprit and the others nodding in agreement.

Hello-san disagreed with her on that; that much was obvious from what Koishi was picking up. *"...You've made a serious mistake, Komeiji- - -"*

"That's only one person's opinion," Koishi softly muttered.

Without any provocation on her part, the bindings triggered themselves. Hello-san continued to speak as Koishi stifled a cry and bit down, trying to withstand the internal pain; he felt it uncivilized to be sure, but he wanted to be able to finish his sentences. *"I'd given you an opportunity, empty-headed one. The chance to become a magistrate of a remade world, to lord yourself over those that lived without senseless thoughts and feelings. Everything a person could ever want or need...everything* you *could ever want or need... and*

you let it slip away like a frightened Rattata. Why? Why did you discard my offer and shun my curiosity?"

Koishi clenched her teeth, weathering the freezing flame until she could no longer feel it bothering her. "If you feel that you have an acute awareness of my needs and wants... then it becomes easier to determine what you are." Her glare matched itself against Hello-san's own, every bit as stressed as she was feeling. "If you really were an all-knowing god, whether benevolent or malevolent, you would not have to rely solely on your eyes and experience. You would be able to accurately discern everything and act accordingly. *Everything,* right down to the tiniest details *.* "

Scorn claimed its VIP seating next to Anger. Normally she would've shied away from being so open, but now that she was cornered she felt she had nothing to lose by speaking her mind. "But you rely on those just a little too heavily. You are not familiar with my past, nor my life. You do not know *why* my brain was a blank slate when we met. You know only what you see, and what that strange ability of yours allows you to ascertain."

The corners of her mouth twitched. "I never thought I'd say this, but the embodiments did me a favor by opening my Eye. You're doubtless a very charismatic human like that ninja said, and it's obvious that you have serious power, but you're just that: a human, with powers that humans were never meant to have, with human thoughts and feelings. ... Me? I'm a satori, Hello-san... and your heart is an open book. This world of Pokémon is not deserving of change like you implied it to be. Do not tell me otherwise, for *you will not fool me anymore."*

Koishi's words echoed loudly in the mostly empty space. She waited for the internal pain that signalled Hello-san's irritation with her speech, but it didn't come. There was only silence as the strange being considered her words. The embodiments too were looking at her, surprised at her sudden burst of courage.

When Hello-san finally spoke, it was with a quiet sense of annoyance and disbelief. *"Your homeworld must not be known for its geniuses."*

"Nor for its common sense," Koishi agreed.

"Yes, that much is a given. Common sense ought to have dictated to you that- - -"

"- - -you do not talk back to a person who could punish you in unimaginable ways."

Hello-san had enough. Another binding materialized over Koishi's mouth, silencing her temporarily; her eyes widened a moment, then shifted to an expression of outright vehemence. Her captor shook his head. *"Refrain from giving me that look. I've grown tired of the rude behavior that you've persisted in. Be thankful that I chose the lesser of two evils; I could have easily selected duct tape instead."*

The being could see the speech bubble and question mark that appeared next to Koishi; he shook his head. *"...Forget what I said."* The binding vanished just as easily as it appeared, and he turned away. *"Remain silent, mindless one, and see what I have in store."*

Bronze dust, silver smoke, and golden light manifested out of nothing, melding together seamlessly and forming assorted shapes and objects. Koishi didn't recognize anything that was being pieced together beyond those: an octagonal base almost as wide as the Palace's main corridor... a multitude of pretty lights and buttons... dark green screens with bright green text and pictures... some sort of great box atop the base, with some collapsable cylinders and thick wires connecting the two... a long tube sticking out of the box away from her, extending seven meters past the edge of the base- - -...

Koishi's heart skipped a beat, and she almost choked. That long tube reminded her eerily of Utsuho's control rod/arm cannon. *Is it going to have the same use...?* "That... is that meant for me?" she asked weakly. "Surely I don't warrant *that* much..."

"Fear not," Hello-san answered her, the words reassuring but the tone unsympathetic. *"Against you, it would be useless. No. I have something else I would like to test it on."*

No... "Leave the embodiments out of this!" Koishi snapped, making the Lake Trio focus on her more intently. "If your problem is with me, then deal with *me,* not them!"

"The very qualities that Arceus created them with would render it ineffectual as well, Komeiji. Further adjustments still remain to be done before their world is ready to change. The Terraformation..."

A bright flash of light from past the cannon's edge made Koishi cry out in surprise, and she squeezed her eyes shut. When they finally adjusted to the light and slowly opened, she realized that another one of those psychedelic portals had been created, one far larger than the one she'd traveled through. Mesprit and the others' own startled cries had a note of understanding to them, as if the puzzle they'd wanted her to help solve had already been cleared up.

"...has a much more pliable target."

The Terraformation, as Hello-san had called it, hummed as he readied it for his so-called test. The inside of the barrel became suffused with a dark glow. *"Forty percent. That should be sufficient. Yes... your homeland shall be cleansed of frivolous feelings. Anger, joy, everything in between... everyone that carries those things...* ***shall be purged from existence."***

N... no... everyone...!

Images of people she knew flashed before Koishi's eyes, and her lips quivered as she thought of them all. Kokoro, the youkai she'd quarreled with over the Mask of Hope. Byakuren Hijiri, who let her come and go at the Temple as she pleased. The red-white shrine maiden and black-white magician who had made her regret the decision she'd made. Assorted children and others who'd crossed her path, almost all of whom would never know or remember who

they'd met. The Underground's local Traffic Accident. A birdbrained powerhouse.

And her beloved older sister, the worrywart.

"Terraformation, all systems ready. ***Fire."***

Before the machine could release its payload, its hum increasing in pitch, Koishi screamed at the top of her lungs...

"SAAAATOOOORIIIIII!""

...and her world faded to black.

Marisa sat atop her broom, hovering over the Forest's trees as Mismagius fluttered around her. She studied the air closely, looking for any signs of disturbance. "You said this was where you saw that rainbow tunnel earlier? Doesn't look like there's anything there now..."

Yes! This is the place. I'm sure of it! Mismagius confirmed, utterly confident in her words.

"Hmmm..." Marisa didn't look quite so sure. She cupped her chin and drifted closer. "I didn't think portals were supposed to be that obvious... but, I'm just a human. What do I know?"

You mean you've seen holes like that before? The 'ghost hat' positively *shivered* with delight. *You are* ***amazing,*** *mistress!*

Marisa scratched the back of her head, sweatdropping. "Hey now, ghost hat, it ain't *that* great. There's a lot of things I've seen, alright? Quit getting so worked up, would you?"

Oh. Okay. Mismagius hung her head, shamefaced. *Sorry, mistress.*

Marisa waved it off. "Eh, you don't have to apologize. You're young, you'll get over it. Now, is there anything else about the hole that you

can remember? Tell me everything, ze."

There's not much else I can recall, the Mismagius admitted. *Just that I saw someone walking inside before it closed.*

"Someone...? Can you describe who it was?"

It was weird. She had this purple thing on her that sort of looked like a closed eye, and these ropes between it and her feet. And she was talking to thin air before she disappeared.

"A closed eye...?" Marisa shut her own eyes, shutting out everything else for the sake of thought. *That sounds familiar...* really *familiar. But my brain... it just doesn't want to make the connection. Did I meet someone like that before? Maybe in the Underground?... No, it wasn't then...* her *eye was open. So, who-*

Even as a shriek of ' *Mistress! Look out!* ' blasted through her mind, an eruption of power manifested itself five meters away. Both magician and Pokémon were catapulted away from it, tumbling end over end sixty meters before Marisa could right herself. Not as experienced in controlling her flight, it took the wailing Mismagius a bit longer to regain her stability.

When the living ghost finally returned to her, she could see what had caused it: another one of those rainbow holes, at least five times the size of a full-grown man and much bigger within than without. All seven colors blended together seamlessly, twisting and twirling, creating a path that seemed like it stretched on forever but ultimately had some unknown destination. Pinpricks of light could be glimpsed around the tunnel, streaking to and from the portal's inner edges. "How about it, Shiver?" Marisa hissed through her teeth, grimacing at something. "Was this what you saw?"

Yes, Mismagius confirmed, not noticing that she hadn't been called 'ghost hat'. *Positively. Absolutely. Abstively posilutely.* She shot Marisa a worried look. *Are you alright?*

"Felt like I'd just been punched by Unzan..." Marisa growled. "Must have been because of how close that thing was when it appeared... I sort of feel like I should punch back, ze." She smirked. "In fact, that's sounding more and more like a good idea."

The poor Pokémon looked completely flabbergasted when she heard her mistress's intention. *Huh?* She looked at the portal, then at Marisa again. *How do you punch something like that? ...And what does it mean to 'punch' something again?*

"Watch and learn," Marisa said, reaching into a pocket and pulling out her mini-hakkero as she drifted closer to the portal. "Want to see a cool trick?"

Okay! Mismagius chirped, her confusion forgotten. *What are you going to do?*

"I'm going to give you your first magic lesson, so listen well. It's not a difficult thing if you're paying attention."

Okay, she repeated. *I'm listening!*

Marisa nodded. She waited until she was a few meters shy of the portal's entrance, then stopped and spoke. "First, you need to concentrate your mind and focus with all your heart." She closed her eyes, going through the motions for Mismagius's sake. "Tenderly whisper to that special something or someone. ...Are you with me?"

Yes, mistress.

"Good." She raised the softly-glowing mini-hakkero, pointing it straight down the center of the portal. "If you can do those things, everything else is a breeze... for when you aim at something you don't like..." Marisa's expression received a diploma, graduating from a smirk to a grin as her weapon of choice shined white. "...an annihilation of love will be unleashed!"

Before she could be questioned about that, Marisa shouted at the top of her voice...

"MAGICCANNON: FINALLLL... MASTERRRR... SPARRRRK!"

...and Mismagius's world faded to white.

The Terraformation was Hello-san's masterpiece, created over the course of three months. None of those he had "recruited" to carry out his plans knew what the machine was made of, nor what powered it. They knew only what it was intended to do: eliminate all life that Hello-san deemed unnecessary while doing only a minimal amount of damage to its target at large. From there, he would work more or less from scratch to reshape the world and its remaining inhabitants, sentient and otherwise, into his image.

Hello-san had hoped to further test his control over his agent "Hearse" and that remarkable power of hers, fixing the errors he had made along the way; more Pokémon and assorted trash had made its way to that other world than he would've liked. The time for engaging in those activities had sadly passed by: Koishi had dared to test his patience and defy his expectations of her, and her homeworld would have to face the consequences, lest someone else from there discover his activities and attempt to challenge him.

(BGM: Sonic Colors OST ~ "Reach For the Stars" Orchestra Version)

A blistering beam of black, blue, and green roared through the dimensional tunnel that "Hearse's" powers had opened. The distance between the tunnel's entry points was great, stretching for at least 20 kilometers as rendered in reality; too close, and it was possible that everything that had come about since his advent would self-destruct from the proximity of the shockwave.

Hello-san waited and observed the situation, confident that Koishi wouldn't try anything to make things worse for herself by attempting

to escape. It shouldn't be long before her world, whatever it was like, would be free of intelligent thought and the drive that went with it.

Several long seconds passed before he realized that something was wrong. He turned first to reassure himself that yes, Koishi *was* still bound... but the differences between before and now were the *greatly* relieved smile on her face, the tears that brimmed but didn't fall, and the words she was uttering under her breath:

"She's reportedly said that 'Rainbow' is the color of tough love. I should've known she was serious..."

And turning back towards the portal, Hello-san realized what she meant.

Something was resisting the Terraformation's mighty roar. On first glance he thought that the dimensional tunnel itself was resisting the blast; his initial tests with the weapon had shown him that such a thing was prone to happen... But no: the tunnel wasn't responsible, and if he hadn't seen the true cause of it firsthand he would not have believed it.

A gargantuan laser blast, white at its very core but overlaid with each visible color on the spectrum, was blocking the way roughly nine kilometers from the target zone. Like a pair of sumo wrestlers pushing against each other, or- - -if one was fond of more amusing mental imagery- - -like a family of squabbling Wobbuffets, the twin superweapons sought to overwhelm the other through sheer force. Neither was successful in this, though, as the contact points didn't shift more than eleven meters either way.

Hello-san snorted softly. Darkness fighting the light... he supposed a lesser person might have laughed at that sort of irony. The beam's color was something he had no control over, though. It was just how it turned out to be. As for something that he *could* manipulate...

Checking the Terraformation's readings to reassure himself that undue stress wasn't being put on the machine from the struggle, he manipulated its controls to increase the power output to its maximum. The beam pulsed as it widened, increasing in size by thirty-five percent and outgrowing its opponent by a decent margin.

Another few seconds passed, and Hello-san folded his arms as he witnessed what took place. The Terraformation was beginning to win out, making some progress towards the other end of the portal. The distance from the other side steadily shrunk to seven and a half kilometers, then six, then five. He nodded in satisfaction, then settled in to wait for the results.

That moment of relaxation was what was going to cost him.

Marisa knew something was wrong when smoke began to rise from her hakkero; the device was becoming hotter the longer she held it. The only time she'd ever felt it overheat was a few years ago, when Reimu had successfully timed out her "Blazing Star" Last Word during one of their duels, and even then it didn't look or feel this bad. The magician couldn't tell *what* was causing it to overheat, just that it was, and it was starting to worry her. Gritting her teeth, she forced herself to keep her hands forward as she tried to stand- - -or *float,* rather- - -her ground.

Almost forgotten next to her was Mismagius; the ghost Pokémon was all but blinded as she tried to comprehend the powers at work here, and failing terribly. Everything that was happening was far out of her realm of comprehension, and she felt more afraid than she'd been when she had first ventured through the tunnel to Gensokyo.

Hearing Marisa grunt as she struggled to keep steady, Mismagius spared a quick look at her beleaguered mistress before squinting back at the ongoing Mister Spock, or whatever it was it had been called. Some instinctive voice at the back of her mind was screaming at her to help Marisa in some way, but what could she possibly do to...?

"It's not a difficult thing if you're paying attention."

She nodded. *Of course. It's just a laser. It's not hard to do. I can do this.*

Concentrate. Focus on what you need to do. Focus.

A quiet sigh as Mismagius closed her eyes and looked inside herself for any sort of power she could use to bring to the fore. *Focus...*

Focus...

Concentrate...

Sparkles appeared before her as if out of nothing, being pulled to the surface as she mimicked Marisa's actions as best as she could. Mismagius's abilities normally would not have permitted her to try something like this so soon in her life, and they weren't truly "magical" in the strictest sense. After being unfused from her mistress, though, Gensokyo's magic-heavy environment had begun to work wonders with her potential...

Mismagius's telepathic voice was as delicate as a flower petal as she whispered softly, remembering that nice pink-haired nurse lady who had taken care of her for her first few weeks of life. The sparkles that materialized responded to her call much more quickly.

The Misdreavus line was, from a battle standpoint, most well-known for their use of Pain Split and Perish Song. This was far from the extent of their capabilities; while the line was defensively fragile, attacks such as Shadow Ball still packed a solid punch. As the sparkles gathered, condensed and repeated the process several times over, one such attack began to manifest itself.

A look of iron cuteness settled on Mismagius's face as she squinted at what was giving her mistress so much trouble, ignoring the sweat that had gathered above her eyes from the Magiccannon's proximity.

She could hear Marisa's pained, stubborn growls as she refused to yield to the onslaught, the hakkero searing hot. That portal just had to go, no question there; so Mismagius, shrieking like a banshee, released her love-filled annihilation.

MUSIC CRAYON: FINALLLL MISTERRRR SPOCCKKKK!

The, um, "Mister Spock" never touched the warring superweapons, its aim too far off-center. Mismagius's contribution, which was intended to support her mistress directly (and likely wouldn't have helped much, considering her single-digit level), instead curved up and over the beams upon entry as the warped physics and gravity of the tunnel had its way with it. The FMS spiraled and twisted around and around, picking up speed as it went...

...until it made a rather spectacular exit, screaming into Hello-san's realm and detonating against the Terraformation's base at the precise moment that he lowered his guard.

...!

Gensokyo's answer to the Hyper Beam had gone where no man had gone before.

With the Terraformation's full power devoted to empowering the beam, nothing could contribute towards its defense; thus, there was nothing stopping Mister Spock from severely damaging its exterior and rupturing its power supply. Assorted implosions and *ex* plosions wrecked it further, and the machine's output dropped to almost nothing; the energy it was producing shrunk from room-sized to pin-sized, turning the tide in the Magiccannon's favor and earning a low comment of "fascinating" from an unseen source.

Feeling the resistance give way through the pain she was feeling, Marisa let herself smile fiercely for just a moment. Pumping every last drop of energy she could muster into the spell, she screamed at

the portal- - -knowing that she couldn't be heard over the FMS's roar but not caring in the slightest.

"RIDE THE DREAMLAND EXPRESS DA ZE~!"

/-/

Twin bolts of psychic power lanced down from the unseen ceiling- - -probably courtesy of the embodiments, though she knew not how- - -and struck the bonds that held Koishi, shattering them into hundreds of pieces. Seizing the opportunity and hoping that Hello-san would be distracted by a certain more *pressing* concern, she directed a quick barrage of heart bullets at the pillars where Mesprit and its companions were held. "Move, move, move move move move move *MOVE!"* she cried as she whirled around, hearing the thick glass break apart but not taking the time to care, and flew at top speed at the still-open portal. *This is going to be cutting it close...!*

The shining light of a rainbow bright filled the room with an ordinary magician's wrath.

When Shayla- - -still struggling over how to handle her situation- - -returned to Miss Komeiji's room to see if she was still resting, she found that she had disappeared; the blankets were halfway across the bed and the high-quality clothes on the chair had been taken, leaving the pajamas in their place. *Great...* now *what? Don't tell me she had a relapse and decided to run away or something...*

She was just about to direct Butterfree to alert someone when she saw the discarded pen and scrap paper that were on the floor. Picking them up, she set aside her clipboard for a moment and read the paper silently.

There wasn't much there. *"I'm sorry that I had to go. There's a lot I want to say, but too little time, so I'll be brief: I owe you all an apology*

for my behavior... bad memories and all. But aside from that, I don't think anyone here can really understand wh"

...And that was it. Cut off right in the middle of a sentence, with no further indication of what the hospital staff couldn't really understand. The girl had said she'd be brief, but Shayla didn't think it would be *that* brief, and she suspected the worst. "Butterfree? Be a dear and get the doctor back up here, please? If he's busy, that's fine; just find whomever. We need to let the police know that we've got ourselves a runaway, at best." *And an abduction at worst,* she added, looking up and seeing the black scorch marks along one wall *. Is that from an Ember attack, or...?*

"Freeee," the Butterfree answered agreeably, wings flapping as it exited the room. The nurse re-read the note, then sighed irritably. *There'd be days like this, my mother said... And here I was going to ask the girl about that weird eye, too.*

Guess I'll probably never know...

The portal was shrinking bit by bit, having learned its lesson (whatever it was supposed to be, anyway). After the Final Master Spark had finally let up, Marisa was forced to let her smoking hakkero drop to the ground. The palm of her right hand and the tips of her fingers on her left hand felt like they were on fire, and it hurt to move them even a little.

Down below, Mismagius was sprawled sideways on the ground near the hakkero, out cold and exhausted from the complete violation of the natural order she'd just performed. The ghost hat's telepathic screech hadn't gone unnoticed, but her mistress hadn't expected her to take in her first lesson that well, much less blow through her entire supply of energy trying to copy the FMS.

Weird... majorly tired and a half... What was all of that?

Marisa felt as if her arms were going to fall off from the strain it had taken to keep that stunt from overwhelming her, and the rest of her body wasn't in the mood to cooperate. She tried to keep herself steady as she lowered herself to the ground, but even so she almost fell off her broom...

...only to be caught and straightened by two pairs of arms. "Easy now," she could hear Alice speaking, several of her dolls diving towards the ground and picking up the unconscious Mismagius. "Don't move around too much."

"I saw what went down over here," Reimu said a bit heatedly, the miko hovering in Marisa's field of vision as she assisted the puppeteer. "Marisa, just what in the world were you *thinking?* If your little servant hadn't stepped up to help...!"

That smile of hers, tired as it was, was typical of Marisa. "We were having a fistfight. I won."

Reimu's gobsmacked silence answered her. "..."

Marisa's smile weakened a little. "Say it. You know you want to."

"...What."

"There. That's more like it." She focused her eyes, trying to see what all of those little blurs were around the trees. *Definitely not a natural tiredness I'm feeling.* "...What's that I'm seeing here? Everything's one big mess. Like my eyes are doing a tango, and I'm not invited."

She'd had been too distracted to notice, but the portal's opening and subsequent light show had gotten the attention of every no-name fairy, low-level youkai, and Pokémon within miles. Even a handful of Gensokyo's more familiar figures were present; Ran, Chen, and Creampuff had shown up just before the big finish, as had Mokou, Cirno, the Three Fairies of Light and Youmu Konpaku (who had been in the Human Village, restocking Yuyuko's food supplies). When Alice wryly pointed this out, Marisa shook her head slowly. "Of all the

times to get a crowd... come on, people!Go away! The contest is *over!* "

A nod from Reimu, who took a defensive position next to Marisa and Alice. To make sure they got the point, she made sure that both her gohei and a Spell Card were visible. "Break it up, everyone. Break it up. There's nothing more to see here. Go home."

The assorted youkai grumbled, but left them alone. Youmu was the next to depart, figuring that everything was well in hand and that serving Yuyuko was more important. Most everyone else soon followed suit, except for the named fairies and Ran's group. The latter was about to ask for the full story from Marisa, but Reimu and Alice were quick to indicate that getting the magician and Pokémon treated was more important. Out of obligation to Yukari and her assignment, Ran refused to let the matter rest and insisted on following them to Eientei. After some initial reluctance they agreed and followed Mokou over there, first coercing Cirno into keeping Marisa's hands cool.

The Three Fairies were too busy playing "Hot Potato" with the discarded hakkero to see Koishi slipping through the portal just before it fully disintegrated. The satori took a deep breath just to savor the feeling of being back in Gensokyo, then flew off to where she knew the Underground's entrance was located. After everything she'd gone through today, there was only one place she wished to be.

A question plagued Reimu's mind all the way to Eientei: *Why wasn't the Master Spark being used under the Spell Card system when it very well should have been? I'm not protesting it... not this time, anyway. I just wish I knew why...*

It was no surprise to anyone that Aya Shameimaru was already waiting for everyone at Eientei. Aya agreed to wait until Eirin dealt

with Marisa before compiling any information, although Alice had to swipe her notepad and pen before things could reach that point.

"Croa... croa... croa..."

And miles away near Misty Lake, an antsy Croagunk stared in the direction where the portal had been. It would be a little while before he could bring himself to walk away.

Such troublesome matters.

The Terraformation was a complete loss, bits and pieces of it scattered everywhere and embedded in every visible surface. Only Hello-san's own mighty power had kept its final cataclysmic explosion- - -caused by the very superweapon that it had fought against- - -from destroying everything else in his domain. He had severely underestimated his target; someone on the other side had expected him to strike, and had come fully prepared to thwart Stage One. He had been under the impression that the residents there had no real power of their own, that they wouldn't know what to do with the Pokémon he had transported there on a whim. After the machine's destruction, it occurred to him that for all his power, that didn't mean that he was omniscent.

Anyone could make a mistake, but it could become much worse if the mistake was never corrected.

There was no denying it now: that world's residents were threats to his plan. Koishi had made a smart move, immediately fleeing while he was distracted by the Terraformation's destruction. If that Future Sight attack hadn't worked out, or if she had lingered for even a few seconds, then she and his old adversaries would not have been long for this world. As it was she was long gone, out of range of his full power, and the Lake Trio had fled under a dangerous cover of light and fury. He could capture them again, probably, but there wouldn't be much point to it yet.

How should I deal with this? , he wondered. He *could* just not open any further portals to that world altogether and remove what remained of his influence, leaving the Pokémon there stranded and its residents unable to interfere... but further analysis showed that a permanent closure was impossible: there was something connecting the two worlds that was undefinable. An aura, perhaps, or some sort of tether that transcended reality and metaphysical understanding? Were they meant to be "mirror worlds" of a sort, existing on opposite sides of the same coin? Whatever the case might be, though, even if he stopped opening portals there, an enemy party from either side could manage to breach the outskirts of his domain if they tried hard enough.

Before he could transform one world, he would have to destroy the other one first.

Hello-san shook his head as he thought about the Trio. *Those three have interfered with me for the last time. First they eliminated a potentially useful ally, disrupted my attempt to create a new world for myself, and now they've subverted someone who could've potentially survived the eventual Terraformation of this world completely unharmed and unchanged. Something will have to be done about them soon.*

I have the information I sought to locate, and I have no further need for pawns. Agent Hearse may do as she wishes in the short time she has left, for I do not require that girl's unique power anymore; it can now be reproduced without the aid of a catalyst. Now that my presence has become known, I do not need any others to act on my behalf. From now on, it all comes down to me, and me alone. I have a plan, one that should neutralize all comers once my efforts come to fruition... but for now, I must rest and ponder recent events.

One day soon, those who survive will awaken in a new world... a world without spirit.

"It did not go the way he expected it to go."

"Do you suspect that he underestimated the source of that blast?"

"More than that. He was not expecting there to be any resistance at all."

"He claims that he has what he is searching for."

"So we can return home?"

"...If we so choose. However, I have an idea."

"Do tell us."

"We were allowed to follow his instructions within reason, and we have done so. However, our orders were to counter anything that would jeopardize the plan... the plan of our wonderful leader."

"Whoever is on the other side would certainly qualify, if he or she was able to cancel out the Terraformation. If the perpetrator passed through the portal after the fact..."

"Perhaps, but perhaps not. I have found it more likely that it is 'Hello-san's' intentions that would put the plan in danger. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to determine the repercussions that would come about, were he to succeed."

"So, what shall we do?"

"We shall remain in Sinnoh and watch, keeping the rest of the team up to date. We must ensure that nothing of importance takes place. If need be, we will step in to derail that which would endanger the world."

"Indeed. For if the world were to fall, where would we be? Where would our master be? Would he be able to obtain the glory he seeks? If the source of such glory is gone, then you already know the answer. And you know as well as I do that he would agree."

"It is decided, then. For the sake of our master, we shall stay and protect his ambitions."

"For we..."

"...the Shadow Triad..."

"...have been, and always will be..."

"...the loyal servants of Ghetsis."

Three shadowy blurs disappeared, and silence was king once more.

To say Satori was surprised was an understatement. A bandaged Koishi had flown into the Palace late that afternoon and arrowed straight for the study, and the elder sister had detected her thoughts well before they could stand face to face. Seeing the open eye served to confirm what had happened, and right away she knew that it was a serious matter.

"I suspect that there's quite a story- - -"

"- - -to tell," Koishi finished, fiddling with her fingers nervously. "There is. And it's definitely- - -"

"- - -going to be something big." Satori reached over to cat-Rin, who was asleep in a small basket, and scratched her behind the ears as they talked. "How important- - -"

"- - -is it? Important enough that Gensokyo on the whole- - -"

"- - -is in danger, Underground and all. This is troubling." Satori's tired frown turned downwards a bit more. "And what about you?"

"How I'm feeling? It's..." Koishi sighed heavily. "...complicated. For once, I really do need to think about things."

"You saw another world," Satori breathed in silent awe. Her eyes narrowed a moment later, coldly furious. "And someone forced open your heart?"

Koishi held up a hand to derail Satori's train of thought. "Don't be upset, Satori. There's trouble over there, the same as here. I was mad at first, but not anymore. Can I talk to you about it? Sister to sister?"

Satori nodded without hesitation, calming down and giving her a quick hug. "You don't need my permission. Let's get some tea first, *then* we'll talk."

As she had suggested, tea and dinner were enjoyed soon afterward. Rin woke up while they were finishing, and Utsuho stopped by on her way back to her bedroom/nursery, so of course that required more refreshments to be brought in. Stories were told by everyone present, Koishi filling them in on her misadventures while the others talked of recent events in the Underground.

While everyone took their turns narrating, Koishi settled onto her cushion contentedly. She knew that she should probably revert to the status quo soon, but for now she decided to enjoy this gathering for what it was. These interactions with those that she considered family, both by blood and not, those that didn't care if she could read minds or not... she would never trade them for anything.

Joy... and pain... are like sunshine... and rain.

"You were run over by a trained bird? *That* had to be embarrassing."

"Not as embarrassing as discovering that Utsuho found a boyfriend without your knowledge, big sister."

"...Touche."

Azelf, Uxie, and Mesprit's Movesets: ?

Approximate Level: 70

Koishi's Notes: I still haven't closed my Third Eye back up yet... I can't help but wonder. My dealings with the three embodiments and Hello-san has got me wondering: Am I right to regress backwards and shut out others' minds because I can't face up to my fears? It's a natural thing to want to do, and I know I'll end up doing it again sooner or later... my heart can not deal with the thought of being hated. But I could feel *that* being's enmity burning like a bonfire, no matter how much he tried to hide it... and going back to our first encounter, even with my subconscious in control, I couldn't escape its notice undetected; at least the embodiments, according to them, needed to *try* to focus on me. I have no answers for that. I just don't understand... but I do know *one* thing is for sure:

I've got a decision to make, and I've got to make it *soon.*

SEMI-ORIGINAL CHARACTER ALERT

Name: Zanthia Quarry

Gensokyo Counterpart: Fujiwara no Mokou

Quote: "Greet the future with your fists! *Burn, Blaziken!"*

Species: Human

Pokémon: Hariyama, Camerupt, Blaziken

Physical Description: A tough and strong adolescent who enjoys working out with her Pokémon. Lightly tanned. Dresses primarily in purple and black summer clothes, with the exception of a red-white bow in her black hair. Wears a pair of flame-patterned fingerless gloves.

History: Was born in Lilycove, but raised in Lavaridge. Is a traveling trainer, one of many seeking to become a Pokémon master. Likes to battle, even if it means provoking others into accepting her challenges, but doesn't get *too* upset when they refuse. Competes in the regional tournaments yearly, but as yet has been unable to get very far; this isn't due to a lack of skill on her part, but rather because Serena Caretti is also in attendance. The Quarry and Caretti families have been feuding for several centuries, although any hatred Zanthia has for Serena is less because of that and more because she is unable to defeat her when it really counts (and if you ask her about that, she'll loudly declare that Serena is an airbrained and arrogant imbecile who isn't worth the air she breathes).

Talisman Is Not Important

MONSTERS IN PARADISE

Outtakes and Other Perilous Stuff: Number Two

By: Curtis Wildcat

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Please see my Author's Bio under the News and Developments section for a few minor announcements. And hook up your headphones while you're at it.

A minor bit of amusement while I work on getting Yukari out of Rustboro City. A common idea with a predictable outcome, and this time, the omake *is* canon.

"...One *more* thing: ..."

FOUR MONTHS AGO

The Yakumo residence was more closely linked to the outside world than anyplace else in Gensokyo, moreso than the Hakurei Shrine. On the outside, and even in most of its rooms, it looked to be an example of classic Japanese architecture and interior design. Deep inside, though, was an office accessible only to Yukari and Ran (Chen was expressly forbidden from entering, for fear that she would disrupt the high-tech setup somehow).

A top-of-the-line PC, a laser printer with a color cartridge, and a flatbed scanner. Communications equipment that would allow the Yakumos and Chen to talk to each other via cell phones if the situation ever arose. A wireless hotspot for Internet access. Those items only scratched the surface of what was present in the room,

filled wall to wall with technology save for a path between the door and the computer.

The room wasn't used too often, but it was still convenient to have. Ran herself didn't mind it too much, and today she had some time to spare: Yukari was dozing, while Chen was perched on the roof keeping her eyes open for visitors. It wouldn't hurt to use it to see what was going on in the outside world from time to time, and as such the kitsune was using the computer for this purpose.

A link to a news article caught Ran's attention, and she went to check it out. From there she went to another article ten minutes later. Then a message board. And one more article- - -...

From outside the room, you could hear the sound of a body hitting the floor.

A few hours passed, and Yukari eventually woke up. That was a fine afternoon nap she had, no nightmares or anything. Checking the time, she smiled; there were enough hours in the day to see if anything was out of line in Gensokyo before she left to pay Yuyuko a visit. She hadn't been visiting the Netherworld's princess too much recently, so she felt like remedying that a little bit.

"Yukari-sama, may I have a word with you, please?" Ran's voice asked. She sounded distressed.

Yukari turned to her, raising an eyebrow. "What is the problem, Ran?"

"Something has been bothering me today," said the shikigami, who seemed to be *blushing.* "Have you told anyone in the outside world about Gensokyo's existence?"

Quietly surprised at the question, Yukari sorted through her memories for any sort of conversation she might have had at any

given time. "Just a young man I bought drinks for in Tokyo, and that was almost twenty years ago," she informed her. "Why?"

Ran swallowed nervously. "I think it would be best if I showed you, Yukari-sama," the overseer was told. "Do you have a minute?"

For a moment, Yukari considered just dropping off to sleep again. It wasn't as if Yuyuko couldn't wait another day...

" *Please,* Yukari-sama?"

Yukari sighed in disappointment as she got up. *Curse my curiosity, making me wonder why Ran is antsy.* She followed the kitsune into the computer room, watching as she deactivated the screensaver showing two ping pong-playing lizards. *Whatever it is, it surely can't be all that bad.*

She continued watching as Ran restored a minimized window, then Yukari sat down in the chair for a closer look. *I doubt that the repercussions of telling a heavy drinker about Gensokyo are all that widespread. What harm could it- - -...*

"Yukari-sama?"

"Yukari-sama? Can you hear me?"

"...Dearest me, *"* Yukari finally managed to breathe, taken back by the sheer magnitude of what she had unleashed. " *Someone's* been busy."

"...Aiiii-yahhh!"

Yukari

MONSTERS IN PARADISE

Chapter Eight

By: Curtis Wildcat

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Apologies for the delay, but my work, my writer's block and my chronic tiredness take priority over actual writing. Night owls and 40-hour work weeks don't mix, people!

"Cat's House", by the Rireba doujin circle, has recently become much harder for me to read. You'll understand why at the bottom of the page.

Find the *Prince of Tennis* reference and go microwave a chimichanga.

The playground that Amber led Yukari to for their battle was four blocks north and another two west from the library, and possessed all the equipment that was expected of such. One corner of the playground had a moderately-sized sandlot for softball games, and just beyond the edge of the outfield was a designated battle field; past that a chain-link fence and a stream, the latter no more than a meter and a half wide, bordered the edge of the playground. With school still in session, only a jogger and his two Mightyenas were present when the group arrived, and it didn't take long for them to finish their exercise anyway.

Amber had taken note of Yukari's anger as they walked, counting herself fortunate that the other woman had wanted to vent her frustrations in a Pokémon battle instead of outright clocking her in

the face. Now that she wasn't overcome with a righteous fury, she was able to consider Yukari's physical strength; if she'd wanted, she could've broken Amber's pin- - -and more- - -easily. When Amber was keeping her arms restrained, the back of her mind had discovered that for all of Yukari's laziness and dislike of work, there were some serious muscles hidden behind that soft and flimsy exterior. *Extraordinarily* serious muscles.

I'm no bodybuilder, she thought as they entered the park, *but even I know that's unnatural. When a person just lays around all day, every day and doesn't put his or her energy to work, it becomes evident to all before long. Flabbiness, shortness of breath, an unwillingness to travel, and weakness all around compared to the average person...*

So, then... Amber took up a position at one end of the field, eyes focused on Yukari but her mind not following suit. Nearby, Ellen and that blind girl who'd been following them sat down on a park bench to watch the proceedings. ... *'Youkai', huh? An unfamiliar term for an unfamiliar woman. Some research is in order, I feel. Is 'youkai' another synonym for 'monster'? What secrets is she hiding? Will she be willing to tell me?* She remembered the discarded book that had been left behind when Yukari had gone upstairs, having glimpsed it on her way out the library. *And why are Dialga and Palkia so important to her? She said she was researching legendary Pokémon, but* why *is she doing that?*

...Well, I guess there's only one way to safely determine whether she's truthful about everything. People can talk about things all they want, but it's their actions *that show what they really believe.* Amber glared out at Yukari. *But first, I have just the Pokémon to give her a workout- - -...huh?*

Yukari, slouching just a little where she was standing, drowsily stared out at nothing with her eyes half-closed. Images of the sea, bright white buildings, baklava, and pelicans danced through her head.

"..."

Amber snarled, whipped a paperback novel out of her pocket and winged it at Yukari across the field. "Hey, don't fall asleep when I'm thinking about you, blast it!"

The book caught Yukari right between the eyes, jolting her awake. "Ow... I'm up, I'm up," she grumbled, rubbing the bridge of her nose. "What time is it?"

"Time to wake up and smell the drubbing!" Amber yelled, pointing a finger at her. A black-marked Poké Ball on her person opened, and an elegant Liepard emerged from it. "Freshly brewed with two cream and sugars, just the way you like it!"

"I prefer the green tea of victory, thank you," Yukari retorted, straightening; her anxious Ninetales took this as a signal to follow Liepard's lead and appear on the field. "Your fare does not suit my tastes. How about a meal at Cafe Yakumo? Would you like to make a reservation?"

"I already *have* a reservation, and it's about your cooking! You won't get any glowing reviews from me, woman!"

"I have no respect for critics who won't touch the food they're offered," Yukari warned. "Eat up or shut up."

"Put a lid on it before you boil," Amber shot back. "Like it or not, humble pie's on the menu today."

"We may as well cook your goose to go along with it. I understand rump roasts have become popular in Hoenn."

"Worthless tripe...!"

As the two of them volleyed boasts and insults, the two kids turned to each other. "So," Merril deadpanned to Ellen, "how much do you want to bet that it'll take at least another ten minutes and a commercial break before either of them call out an actual attack?"

"...It's not a bet if we both agree," the book-lover told her, scrawling something in a little notepad. "Nothing ever gets accomplished when she's reduced to this."

"Don't I believe it." Merril gave both Pokémon a once-over. "Huh. Never seen that- - -"

"...It's a Liepard," Ellen interrupted, still writing. "Native to both the Unova and Kalos regions, but more commonly seen in the former. Dark-type. Has a bad reputation as a deceiver and thief."

A few blinks. "Oh. ...Well, um... thanks. So... you from Unova?"

"...Mom is." Ellen closed her notepad. "...I used to hear a lot of bedtime stories. Maybe I'll tell them to you sometime."

"I suppose..."

Merril took another look at the field. Yukari and Amber were still arguing, and looked as if they were going to keep this up for a while. Even when Ellen got up to retrieve her mother's thrown book, Yukari didn't take notice of her presence.

Meanwhile, both Pokémon had grown bored with the whole affair. Liepard was sitting on its haunches and was in the middle of grooming one of its forepaws, whereas Ninetales had rolled onto its back and was swatting imaginary insects out of the air. Merril's eyes flicked between all four figures once, then again...

And suddenly, she decided she'd had enough. *"Oi, nutters!"* Merril shouted, successfully getting everyone's attention. "The Pokémon are awaiting their trainers' directions!"

Everyone was silent for several long moments, staring at each other and at Merril. After a few more seconds, Yukari sighed; her features settled into a pout. "And here it was *so* enjoyable matching wits with

Amber. You children are no fun at all." She gestured, and Midori sprang to her feet.

"'Enjoyable'? I had you on the ropes, and you know it." Amber clapped her hands once; Liepard heard that signal and raised itself off the ground, ready to battle. "So. Ladies first?"

Yukari smiled. "Certainly. Midori- - -"

"Liepard, Assist!" Amber declared, cutting her off.

As the cat Pokémon purred an affirmative and glowed with a soft blue light, the smile gained a sweatdrop for a companion. *'Ladies' first, huh? Is chopped liver all I am to you?*

The light faded, and Liepard raised its head into the air and yowled for as long and loud as it could. Yukari's eyes narrowed as she saw the dark-type's lithe form become the slightest bit muscular. *If memory serves, it can use moves at random from amongst her entire team...* "Midori, Heat Wave."

Amber had probably been expecting a Flamethrower. What billowed from Midori's mouth was instead an intense eruption of red-hot air, covering a wider area. "Out of the way!" the woman ordered, throwing up her arms to shield her face.

Liepard bounded into the air, just skimming the edge of the Heat Wave with nary a wince. A snarling grunt told the Pokémon that the Wave had caught its trainer instead, but as long as most of her skin was covered she ought to be alright. Hearing Amber's yell of "Shadow Claw!", Liepard dropped to the ground just behind the end of the air burst and sprang at Midori, a dark gray aura manifesting around one of its forepaws and lengthening its reach.

"Double Team."

Liepard's Shadow Claw slashed at its target... which wavered and dissolved into thin air. Upon landing, it surveyed the immediate

vicinity in confusion: arrayed in a semi-circle around it were five Ninetales, each one a perfect copy of the original. At first glance, it would be impossible to tell which one, if any, was the real one.

Yukari smiled. "Heat Wave."

Amber's order to go evasive didn't come in time, and at close range Liepard took the attack's full force. The cat grimaced and growled, enduring the hot air until Midori's exhalation ran its course; seeing it still standing- - -and *grinning toothily* - - -irked Yukari a little. *Much higher level than I anticipated. They've been together a while, I'd wager.*

"Night Slash them all, Liepard!"

Liepard turned and swiped at the nearest two illusions, its claws a blur of black and purple. Not waiting for the illusions to finish dissipating, it immediately gathered its feet beneath it and sprang to the left, claws in position- - -...

"Niii- - -?!"

...and made contact with Midori's flank, dissolving the last illusion in so doing and slinging the Ninetales near the field's indicated boundary.

A cackle from one of the bench warmers. *"BAM!"* Merril crowed, pumping a fist and eliciting a disapproving stare from Ellen.

Yukari winced as her Pokémon landed; her vision had caught each movement that Liepard made, but it had moved too quickly for Midori to cancel the Double Team and move out of the way. "Are you still able to fight, Midori?"

A sharp bark. *"Nine!"*

Yukari nodded as Midori got its feet beneath it and stood up. The Ninetales was hurt, and getting tired, but the drive to battle still

burned in its eyes. "That's my girl."

Amber didn't waste time commenting on the fox Pokémon's determination, probably having seen it enough times in similar opponents to consider it old hat. "Liepard, Assist!"

The dark cat again glowed softly, and a few moments later it lunged at Midori with its mouth wide open; whether it was a Bite or a Crunch attack, Yukari wasn't sure. Didn't matter much in the long run, though. "Heat Wave."

Midori complied and opened its own mouth. Bits and pieces of yellow and green energy appeared inside, expanding rapidly- - -...

Yukari did a double-take. *Hold the phone...!*

Liepard's fangs never reached their target, instead charging directly into a vaguely spherical Energy Ball. This time it was the dark-type's turn to be thrown across the battlefield, although it caught itself and came screeching to a stop on its feet. " *Paaaard,"* it hissed, its pointed tail twitching.

Merril whistled in admiration. *"Such* energy!"

"..." Ellen stared at her new friend for a moment. "...Please don't do that."

If Amber was surprised, she didn't show it. "You ask for a Heat Wave, and you get an Energy Ball. I wish springtime cooperated like that," she joked.

Well, there's *some flashbacks.* "Don't we all? Will O Wisp, Midori," Yukari ordered.

The Ninetales whined, but reluctantly nodded and focused. Fist-sized purple fireballs blazed to life around her, circled for a few seconds, then broke off one by one and flew in an arc towards their target.

None of them got there. Following through on another Shadow Claw command, Liepard happily swatted each fireball out of the air, its speed and reflexes outpacing the Will O Wisp easily. Reduced to ribbons, the flames fizzled out before they hit the ground.

Yukari aimed to capitalize on Liepard's preoccupation. *Let's try again.* "Heat Wave this time, please."

The furnace-like exhalation from Midori's mouth caught her opponent squarely. Liepard grimaced and snarled, its head bent low to the ground- - -...

"I'm afraid you still have a ways to go."

- - -...and slowly stood up straighter, bearing the Heat Wave with an almost regal disposition; it felt the obnoxious temperatures, but refused to react to them. Amber's matter-of-fact comment had been directed at the opposing team, not at the Liepard, but the cat Pokémon regardless took it as a signal to show that it would *not* back down before this experience-less upstart. Its action surprised Midori enough that she cut short her attack by several seconds, 'nine'ing an inquiry.

One problem with that action: Liepard would only answer that inquiry with its claws, and both participants knew it. Sure enough, on Amber's orders, it came rushing in quickly enough that it seemed to be a barely visible blur.

"Evade- - -!"

Yukari's hasty command did not come soon enough; even as Midori's muscles tensed, Liepard was already upon her.

"Niii- - -!"

One set of claws flashed in, disrupting Midori's jump before it began with a Night Slash and causing her to stagger- - -...

"Lieee..."

...- - -followed closely by another, this one with the express intent to end the match decisively. Midori took the attack in its entirety with a pained bark- - -...

"... *paaaarrd!"*

...- - -and was blasted straight at the fence that bordered the battlefield, slamming into the links and making them ripple all along its length before she fell to the ground; Yukari flinched as she turned, seeing the impact. Liepard settled down warily, its forepaws their normal coloring once more.

"...So, is it over?" Ellen asked softly.

Merril shook her head. "Not until the fish jumps."

Midori struggled to get to her feet, whining, but her willpower gave out and she collapsed in a faint. A passing Goldeen chose that moment to splash about in the stream nearby, scattering water in all directions.

The technophile nodded decisively. "It's over."

-GAP-

Yukari regarded the dazed Midori and the victorious Liepard, itself breathing heavier than normal, with a conflicted expression. Clearing it, she nodded and raised Ninetales' Poké Ball. "Return and sleep for a bit, Midori," she said as the Pokémon disappeared in a dim flash of red light. "We can talk later."

Across the way, Amber stooped down to congratulate Liepard; the dark cat purred and nuzzled the side of its trainer's face, pleased at a job well done. There was a fair bit of wincing as they celebrated, as both trainer and Pokémon had to deal with a tremendous amount of heat being thrown around; the air was cooling down quickly, though,

and they along with it. Still, a visit to the Pokémon Center later would be in order...

Hearing footsteps, the both of them looked up to see the kids and Yukari stop a few meters away. "So," Amber spoke. "Did you work off that anger?"

Yukari considered this. "About as much as I could, considering the situation I'm in."

A nod. "For what it's worth, Yakumo, I really *am* sorry for attacking you unprovoked. It's just- - -"

"Were I in your situation, I would've done something similar, I assure you," Yukari said, waving it off. "You probably could've taken action through less violent means, but under the circumstances I can let it slide. It's not entirely your fault." *If her childhood had been a normal one, Ellen would be out traveling by now. That source of worry would've been long gone.*

Amber gave Liepard one last pat and stood up, recalling it. "So," she repeated. "What happens next?"

"Well, first I've got to get Midori over to the Pokémon Center..." Yukari paused, concealing a yawn behind a fan. "Then I've got to get some shut-eye. I was feeling tired even before I was ambushed."

"I meant as far as your mission is concerned. Don't think I didn't see you reading about Sinnoh's legends earlier."

Yukari would've reclined against a gap if one had been available to her. She settled for smiling in such a way that Merril and Ellen shivered at seeing it. "I've determined my destination, Mrs. Harrison. Sinnoh's own Mt. Coronet awaits me. I have a few words to say to Dialga and Palkia for endangering my home and depriving me of my beauty sleep."

Ellen had heard her mention this once already, but that tone of voice she'd used... it almost made her pity anyone idiotic enough to get in the woman's way. "... ...If anyone else were saying that," she intoned, echoing the others' silent sentiments, "I'd ask if they were a few cards short of a blackjack."

"I'll be checking through that book one more time to see if I missed anything," Yukari continued, "but for now everything seems clear-cut. ..." She frowned. "Or that's what I'd like to say. I'm ready to go, but Midori sure isn't."

"That goes without saying." Amber rested one hand on her hip. "If someone like me, who hasn't battled seriously in more than a decade, could take you in a Pokémon fight, Mt. Coronet would swallow you whole. I wouldn't suggest travelling there without either a full team or some strong trainers backing you up."

Yukari's eyes narrowed. "I don't have time to collect and raise a full team of six. It would take me months or even years to bring them up to an adequate level. It's imperative that I finish this job as soon as I can. Recruitment seems like a better alternative."

She wasn't sure if the kids had noticed Amber's brief uneasiness before she got her answer. "Perhaps. Of course, that doesn't mean that you can neglect your Ninetales..."

"Wouldn't dream of it. Is there a place where I can sleep?"

Amber considered this for a few moments, then gave Yukari a few PokéDollars out of her pocket. "The Pokémon Center ought to do just fine. It's no high-class hotel, but they'll let unregistered trainers sleep there for a fee. Just don't make a habit of it."

"'Tis all I needed to know. Talk to you later." Yukari turned away and strolled off, nodding at the kids as she went.

"...Mother?"

"Hey, lady. Are you still with us?"

Amber stared out at Yukari as the youkai left the park, her thoughts and expression as conflicted as her opponent's had been; she barely heard her child and new acquaintance try to get her attention. When she finally spoke, her voice was heavier than Ellen was used to hearing from her. "Ellen, be a dear and call your father when we return, would you? Let him know that we'll be having some company for dinner tonight."

Her daughter's typical delay allowed Merril to beat her to the punch. "Why couldn't you just do it yourself?"

Amber walked away from them, exiting the park and not responding to their inquiries; the kids gave each other a quick look, then hurried after her.

Halfway back to the library, both kids jumped in surprise at a sharp sound. Merril looked around her, unsure of the source, but Ellen immediately focused her eyes on her mother. Though she was curious enough to wonder why Amber felt the need to crack her knuckles, she suppressed that curiosity and kept quiet.

-GAP-

As soon as she was sure that no one was listening, including the Chansey assistants, Rustboro's resident Nurse Joy released an irritated sigh. Sure, she could have gotten away with it if the others in the room were close enough to hear it, but she had an image of serenity and kindness to maintain.

Sitting back down behind the front counter and leaving the assistants to do their work, Joy looked over at the source of her irritation. The woman had turned over her Pokémon for a checkup and healing, handed over some money for the use of the Center's sleeping

quarters, then hadn't even bothered to walk over there; she'd instead draped herself across a couch in the lobby and immediately zonked out. That quiet blowing noise Joy was hearing wasn't the heat vent; it was the woman's soft snoring.

A quiet jingle; another trainer's Pokémon were finished with their checkup. Joy had them out and ready to present to said trainer when he walked up to receive them. "Here you are," she told him happily, forgetting about Yukari. "All of them are perfectly healthy and fit to go."

The cloaked man nodded his thanks. "Do you know whether there are any strong trainers currently in Rustboro, aside from the gym leader?"

"Or to put it another way, 'How many trainers in town could push a Darkrai to its limits?'" Joy answered playfully.

The man closed his eyes for a moment. "You're not going to let me forget it, either."

"I mean no offense, Tobias," Joy hastily told him, not wanting to annoy anyone. "I caught most of the Sinnoh tournament on television." She sat down to update a few files on the computer. "But if you don't mind me asking, don't you feel that entering a tournament with legendary Pokémon in tow is rather unfair?"

"In my defense, I wasn't the only one." Tobias reclaimed his team as he spoke. "The Heatran in the atrium wasn't hard to spot."

"...That doesn't answer my question, though."

Tobias smirked. "I take it you missed the semi-finals, Nurse Joy?"

Joy frowned as she looked up at him. "Yes, I did. An emergency case arrived at the Center, and I had to see to it. Why? What happened?"

"Ever see a Latios and a Pikachu battle to a draw? It's quite the show."

To say that Joy was surprised was understating it. "A Latios and a *what?!"*

"I am completely serious, Joy." There was a hint of happiness and pride in the man's voice. "Why the media didn't give him a larger focus is beyond me." He gave a brief explanation, elaborating on how Darkrai and Latios were taken down.

"...Forgive me, Tobias," Joy spoke, surprise still coloring her voice, "but I find that rather difficult to believe."

The cloaked trainer shrugged, the motion barely visible. "They'll be re-airing the tournament on the local networks soon; you can see for yourself then." Again, his eyes closed for a moment. "Do you see my point, though? I have no regrets about overpowering everyone in my path, for if anyone deserves to be the Champion, it will be the person that can accomplish the impossible."

Joy wasn't sure whether he was referring to himself and the team he had collected, or to the trainer that had impressed him. Either way, she felt she understood things a little better. "That's a day to look forward to. Thank you for enlightening me."

Tobias accepted her thanks. "You're welcome. So, about that request I made...?"

"Hold it."

Nurse and trainer turned towards the nearby couch. Yukari's head and left arm were visible over it, and Joy belatedly realized that she hadn't heard the woman snoring in the last few minutes. "Do you need something, Mrs. Yakumo?" she asked politely.

Yukari gazed at them both through a half-open left eye, her right eye unwilling to open for the moment. "Yes. I'd like a few minutes of his

time... Tobias, is it? I have an inquiry to make regarding recent events in Sinnoh. You *were* there recently, yes?"

Joy and Tobias exchanged looks for a few seconds before the latter decided to humor her. "What is it you wanted to- - -"

"One *more* thing," Yukari interrupted, this time addressing Joy. "I've never married and never *will* marry. The next person who calls me 'Mrs. Yakumo' I'm going to smack, so help me."

The peaceful and good-natured Nurse Joy, who would be hard-pressed to remember a time when she'd ever thought badly about anyone, silently wondered if Yukari was deranged. It wouldn't have surprised her that Tobias was thinking along similar lines. Neither of them voiced their thoughts aloud, though, and it wouldn't be until much later that they would figure out the truth behind Yukari's strange behavior.

-GAP-

The rest of the day passed by swiftly. Amber bustled around the library, keeping busy and continually checking up on Ellen and the blind child- - -'Merril', she reminded herself. All the while, multiple scenarios checked in at her brain's front desk for their appointments. After Yukari returned to the library a few hours later (and was immediately distracted by Merril), Amber slipped away and hustled off to the Pokémon Center to follow through on a plan that met with her approval; she was back quickly enough that only a few people realized that she was even gone.

Yukari too was planning, answering on auto-pilot Merril's questions about her time in Hoenn. There was so much to accomplish before she reached her final destination, and not enough time in which to do it...

Midori had to become strong enough to assist her, and at the same time Yukari had to hurry before it became too cold. Sinnoh was known for being less than temperate a fair chunk of the year,

especially in the north, and being there for too long this late in the year would likely trigger her subconscious urge to hibernate; she could resist it, like she did in order to launch her "attack" on the Lunar Capital years before, but doing so would be... troublesome. Trekking over and through Mt. Coronet could be disastrous unless she was prepared for it.

And Yukari was nothing if not excellent at preparation.

Before they realized it, it was time to close the library for the day. Yukari started to inquire about a list of restaurants, but was sharply interrupted by Amber's declaration that she and Merril would be spending the rest of the evening at her house. When she asked why, she was told only that no one wanted her to bike anywhere else, for fear that she'd cause a tidal wave clear out at Sootopolis. She shook her head at that, but followed Amber to her house in Rustboro's residential section.

Honestly. You take one bike ride, and suddenly you're a pariah. I knew *I should've flown.*

The meeting between Yukari and Amber's husband, a well-muscled security guard who worked the morning shift at the Devon Corporation, was short and polite; immediately thereafter, the overseer glimpsed a Swampert and a Raichu relaxing in the back yard, and when she inquired about it he confirmed that they were his. Yukari wondered if perhaps Raichu would object to a Pokémon battle and considered asking the man for one, but eventually decided that Midori needed more training first. If Amber's Liepard was any indication...

It didn't stop her from letting Midori play with them while the meal was in progress, though, and it looked like the Ninetales was having fun being chased by Raichu around the yard. That left Yukari free to focus on certain... other things.

Yukari was a trifle surprised when she found that dinner that evening was comprised of hot dogs, potato salad and small bowls of wonton

soup, a reaction that was mirrored on Merril's horrified face. Even taking into account the family's mixed origins, it didn't raise any pleasant thoughts about *where* the hot dogs came from.

Seeing their surprise, Amber had chuckled and explained to them that no Pokémon was involved in their creation. "That would imply that people couldn't tell the difference between a Miltank and your standard bovine," she had said. "The markets are required by the League to make it known that no Pokémon were harmed, and kids are taught to differentiate between them and our food sources for their own safety." She reached over and patted her husband's arm as he flexed it. "You can't get this strong on a vegeterian diet alone, dears, and berries can only do so much."

...Don't question it, Yukari. Don't question it. Just smile, nod, and eat the food. Don't ask any embarrassing questions.

Thankfully, Merril had just enough good sense to follow her lead.

While they were eating, Yukari noticed that Amber seemed a bit nervous about something or other. Her husband noticed her behavior, but chose not to comment on it; this told the overseer that he already knew what was going on. She considered asking Amber about it, but decided that if it was deemed important, the librarian would broach the topic herself- - -...

"Oh, to blazes with it. I can't take this waiting anymore," Amber snapped suddenly, standing up and getting everyone's attention. "There's something I have to say. Yakumo, I've decided that I don't trust you enough to wander off to Sinnoh on your own. I'll be going along as your chaperone, and I will *not* take 'no' for an answer."

The room was completely silent for three long seconds.

"Beat," Merril uttered softly.

"...Did you just say what I thought you said?" Ellen asked her mother, the spoon she was using almost falling from her hand.

"Every word of it, Ellen. I'm not leaving her to wander around and cause trouble. Can you think of anyone else qualified to keep her in line?"

Another short silence.

"Beat."

Yukari looked pleased, but the lone sweatdrop on her temple betrayed her unease. "Should I be happy to know that I have your support, Mrs. Harrison?"

"Happiness doesn't factor into this." The gray-skinned woman paced back and forth a bit as she spoke. "You're heading right for disaster, and you're treating this like a softball game. I don't care how calm you are about it all. This is one big warning sign, and I'm going to make sure it's shut off."

Merril took a long sip of her tea and looked up at the ceiling for a moment. "Beat."

Yukari's eyes bored into Amber's. "So you're serious about this, then. But what about your family? How do they feel about this?"

"...Yes," Ellen softly murmured. "...How *do* we feel about this?"

"Amber and I have already talked about it," her father stated. "While I don't like how she decided to leave on the spur of the moment, we both agreed that you're better off not going solo. It's better this way, both for you and for Hoenn."

A raised eyebrow. "Me I understand, but for Hoenn?"

"It beats being labeled a natural disaster, doesn't it?"

"...I'm starting to get the feeling that none of you have any confidence in me," Yukari commented dryly, finishing her hot dog.

Merril giggled at this. "And you're just getting that *now?"*

Yukari sighed and shook her head. "You'd think they'd never seen an evil bicycle before."

"Inanimate objects are not evil," Amber objected. "They don't have the capacity for it."

"I wouldn't be too sure, now..."

While the conversation swung off the 'serious' route and onto the 'ridiciulous' route, Yukari kept one eye on Ellen. Throughout the discussion, the girl's lips occasionally twitched as if she wanted to say something. When both parties ran out of things to talk about, Ellen opened her mouth to speak...

...but nothing was said. She had an intense look on her face, and her breathing had picked up the tiniest bit... but she just could not bring herself to say the words that were on her mind, whatever they were. Yukari knew that Amber's announcement came out of nowhere, so it must've been a small shock for the girl; she probably wanted to lodge a protest, as it were.

Or maybe she wanted to come along...

No other expressions were forthcoming. The Harrison child was silent on those matters, instead making tracks for the back yard after finishing her meal. Yukari stared at Amber questioningly, receiving a soft sigh in response. "Don't worry. I'll talk to her before I go," the woman said.

"We *both* will," her husband added, giving Amber a quick look.

Yukari certainly hoped so. The less distractions she had before she got to Sinnoh, the better.

-GAP-

Night fell on Rustboro.

The time had come for all children, intellectuals or not, to get a good night's sleep. The stars twinkled in the sky outside the house. Merril, who was bunking in the boys' old bedroom, slept like a stone. Yukari too was asleep, utilizing a futon down in the living room; Ninetales had snuggled close to her before falling asleep herself.

Upstairs, sitting up in her bed and listening to her parents talk to her, Ellen couldn't close her eyes. She was still dwelling on Amber's intent to leave home...to leave *her* ... to try to keep Yukari from causing some sort of calamity. Deep down she felt distressed and angry, but for all her knowledge she couldn't figure out how to safely express that anger; she wanted to say aloud that she wanted to be taken along, and got only that strange impulse to stay at home instead. She *did* manage to tell her parents that she was very... *displeased* by it all, but it still felt like something was eating away at her stomach.

"...Mother, are you sure there's no other way? Do you really have to go? ...Are you sure you can't get anyone else to keep tabs on her?"

Amber let a touch of the sadness she was feeling enter her voice. "Dear, there *isn't* anyone else. Roxanne has her duties to the Gym and to the school. Calico's not in the right state of mind for any sort of assignment. Any acquaintances we have that would be able to do this are either out of contact or have their own lives to experience. I'm the only one of any significant ability whose commitment to Rustboro is loose enough to allow for a vacation."

Ellen knew enough about her mother's traveling days to determine that "significant" wasn't enough to describe it. Before she married she'd claimed enough badges to partake in Unova's, Sinnoh's, and Hoenn's respective tournaments, finishing in at least the Top 16 in all three and *winning* in Unova's by the time she was 20. She had seen and done a great deal before she decided that she'd had enough, and her Pokémon were with her every step of the way.

It wasn't Amber's strength that worried her. It was something much more selfish, and yet entirely meaningful for any child that has ever

experienced the happiness of living with a loving mom and dad: she didn't want to be left alone, to be without someone who had been a familiar presence all her life.

Ellen looked away from her parents' eyes. "...It isn't fair. Why is this happening? Why do you have to go and leave me here?"

"Why do you feel that you have to remain in Rustboro?" Amber softly returned. "What sort of connection do you have with the library?"

"...We've been over this before, mother. This isn't something I can express in words. It's just something that I feel I have to- - -..."

But as Ellen spoke, she realized that the reason she was giving Amber was the exact same one that her mother intended to give her. One of her hands gripped the edge of her blanket. "...That isn't very nice..."

"I'm not happy about her going either, Ellen," her father spoke. "But this is something she has to do. She may be able to prevent a complete disaster if she goes with Yukari, whether it's her doing or someone else's. Wouldn't it be thrilling to know, after the fact, that your mother saved the world? What child hasn't wanted to brag that his or her parents were heroes?"

Ellen's eyes narrowed just a bit, and her grip on the blanket tightened. "...She already *is* a hero," she murmured, almost too softly to hear. "...She's put up with me, little anti-social me, for a decade. She's given me everything I've asked for, and given me the things I *didn't* ask for but needed regardless... and now she's leaving to look after a nutcase?"

Amber reached out, a tear edging out the corner of her eye. "Please, Ellen," she whispered, drawing Ellen into a hug. "Please try to understand. And... please forgive me. I promise I'll be back as soon as I can."

"...Can I have that in writing?"

Both parents smiled weakly at that. "I don't know about any writing," Amber said as she let go, "but I could probably be convinced to procure a starter Pokémon for you. A Grass-type, even."

Ellen stared at her mother for about ten seconds before slowly nodding. "...I'm holding you to that, mother. But if you don't mind, I have one thing to ask of you before you go to bed."

"What is it, dear?"

"...Could you please sing to me?"

Amber blinked. "Ellen, aren't you a little old to be sung to sleep by your parents?"

Ellen's eyes stared out at absolutely nothing. "... ..."

Her father snorted in amusement and stood up, patting Ellen's shoulder before turning towards the door. "I'm going to bed, Ellen, Amber-chan. And dear, don't forget to give Swampert his vitamin supplements before you turn in."

"I won't forget," Amber promised. "Good-night, Ricky."

"...Good-night, father," Ellen said, her voice back to its normal volume.

"Good-night, you two."

Amber waited until Ricky shut the door behind him before sighing. "So you want me to sing you to sleep, huh? Sometimes you're an incorrigible child, you know that?"

Ellen rested her head against her pillow. "...I love you too, mother."

It was Amber's turn to give an amused snort. "I get the idea, Ellen. I get the idea. ...Alright. I have just the song, and it's one you know well. Open your ears and listen carefully, alright, little Deerling?"

Taking a deep breath and letting the words she wanted to sing come to the forefront, she began...

"Here I am, just an old soul here in the dusk, captivated by the gulls..."

Down in the living room, during the song's second loop, Yukari's eyes opened halfway. She listened carefully, not moving lest she disturb Midori, and let the lyrics roll across her mind.

"Here I am, just an old soul here in the dusk, captivated by the gulls."

Yukari could feel the sentiment in those words. She was no Keine Kamishirasawa, but for all that it was a simple lullaby, she thought she could get some inkling of the woman's history by listening to it. It showed a side of Amber that had barely been present during their prior interactions.

"Here I am, just an old soul here in the dusk, captivated by the gulls..."

Ellen's eyes were almost closed, and her breathing was becoming lighter and easier. Not that she had showed it to anyone other than her family, but from her perspective it had been an eventful day. Listening to her mother sing that short but wonderful song one last time before she left for who knows how long... she would miss it, she knew.

"Here I am, just an old soul here in the dusk, captivated by the gulls."

As her eyes fully shut and she started to drift off, Ellen promised herself- - -not for the first time, and probably not for the last- - -that she would finally leave Rustboro someday. A sea and an entire region away, the Bridge that her mother had once called home waited silently. Of all the places that Ellen longed to see in person,

that place was at the top of the list; mere photographs would never be enough.

Yukari was contented and asleep by the time the last of the notes reached her ears. She already knew what she wanted to learn.

-GAP-

"Patchouli?"

"What is it?"

"Are you feeling alright today? You're smiling, but it seems rather..."

"...Let's just say, Koakuma, that my dreams were less than stellar. It's nothing I can't handle, so don't concern yourself with it."

"Oh. ...Well, alright; if you say so. Should I go and grab your research materials?"

"Please. And bring me both that manual and the orange stone, too."

And as Koakuma flew off, Patchouli continued to smile sadly at nothing in particular. Without raising her voice or putting any real effort into it, her lips formed the lyrics that echoed in her short-term memory. Even without having experienced it, she could still feel the nostalgia that radiated from them.

" I cannot help but cry as I stare out at the sea, yearning for those winsome gulls above the blue harbor and me..."

-GAP-

A blue sky. A bit breezy. Bunches of clouds, but no sign of rain. Somewhat cool, but not terribly so. As far as Ellen was concerned, it was the wrong sort of weather for her mother to be leaving her behind. It should've been raining, the atmosphere gloomy and her mood even more so.

In any event those were the weather conditions when she got up the next morning, so she'd just have to deal with it. She hoped her mother's replacement- - -Cory something or other- - -didn't mind her being crankier than normal.

As she finished getting ready for the day, Ellen frowned as her thoughts turned to Yukari. Trustworthy or not and friendly or not, she wasn't sorry to see the woman go. It was difficult for her to believe that no one else was feeling antsy from being in Yukari's presence; yesterday, the girl had even asked Roxanne for her opinion when she came to return her lesson materials...

"Hmm... well, she seems quirky, but beyond that I don't see anything really 'dangerous' about her. Are you sure you aren't imagining things, Ellen?"

...and found out that if the gym leader didn't think about the bike-induced wreckage (which was presently being cleared away by citizens and Pokémon alike), she wouldn't be drawn back into the insanity that was Yukari's very existence. She couldn't blame the older girl for her behavior; Roxanne always did her best to keep a level head, and being distracted by oddballs wouldn't help with that at all.

Granted that everyone agreed that Yukari was a rather *intelligent* sort of oddball...

... *This trip that they're making had better be worth it.*

Everyone else was awake by the time Ellen left her room. Ricky was already gone, his line of work requiring him to leave the house early. The remaining adults were wrapping up their respective breakfasts. Merril hadn't finished hers yet, instead telling the grownups a story of some kind. "- - -and when he answered the phone, he told me that the cannon had malfunctioned and made it rain PokéBlocks from the ceiling."

Yukari's fan was hiding her mouth, something which told Ellen that she was laughing on the inside. Amber had instead shut her eyes as if she were in pain. "I don't suggest any careers in stand-up comedy for you, Elliot."

"Hey, *I* thought it was funny..."

Ellen ignored the rest of the conversation as she sat down to eat, not daining to respond when she was told "good morning". She didn't want to put up with this, or the truth of her mother leaving home and leaving her last child behind.

-GAP-

Unfortunately, she had no choice. The minutes flew by as Ellen ate, mind drifting and her expression unfocused. Barely remembering to pick up her feet to keep from tripping, she brought the dishes to the kitchen and rinsed them off before leaving them in the sink to finish later. Returning to the living room, she found that everyone was there waiting for her. *...Had that much time passed so quickly?*

Amber stooped down to hug her, something which she almost didn't notice. She *did* notice, though, when her mother pressed something into her hand before standing up. "...What is it?"

"Protection," Amber said bluntly, her voice heavy. "I'll want it back when I come home, okay?"

Ellen took a look at it. She recognized it immediately: it was a slightly dented, black-marked Poké Ball. *...Liepard's Poké Ball...?* Her eyes met those of her mother's. "...Why? I'm not a trainer. I have no experience with anything like that. Would he listen to me if I gave him a battle order?"

"You won't need to."

...I won't need to? That's odd... why would that...?

No answers were forthcoming as Amber smiled sadly at her, mouthed the words 'I love you', then turned to discuss something in low tones with Merril. Ellen stared down at the ground, unsure of herself. *...I get the feeling I should be doing something here... but it's an empty feeling. What does she mean? How should I be reacting?...*

Yukari's voice cut into her thoughts. "It's not good to withhold your feelings from others, little bookworm."

Ellen's head turned sharply towards her at that comment. "...If it wasn't personal before, it is now. Leave me alone, Yakumo."

A fairly offended sniff. "What, a woman isn't allowed to say what's on her mind?"

"...This coming from the person who claimed that her *bicycle* was responsible for who-knows-how-many millions of PokéDollars worth of damages to public property?"

"Just stating a fact, Ellen." Yukari stooped down to eye level, something between her fingers. "You'll have to use something other than that monotone to communicate sooner or later."

Ellen's expression had a hint of a challenge in it. "...What do you intend to do about it?"

Yukari's smile shifted into the realm of the enigmatic. "All in due time. All in due time. You'll understand someday."

"...Give me a hint."

"Draw your own hints. I'm not going to do your work for you." Yukari pressed whatever it was she was holding into Ellen's hand, her voice dropping in volume until it could barely be heard over Merril and Amber's discussion. "You're smart enough to break out of your secret room on your own. All you need is a nudge in the right

direction. Nothing more." She stood up and backed off towards the front door, putting on her pack as she went.

...Did I wake up in Puzzle World or something? Why can't these people make any sense at all? Why?

After a few moments, Ellen realized that the room had become completely quiet. Putting all thoughts of strange grownups from her mind for the moment, she turned towards Amber and Merril to see what the holdup was.

-GAP-

Merril couldn't blame the woman for thinking the way she did, but it *did* strike her as being narrow-minded. Sure, someone coming completely out of nowhere and volunteering for guard duty was strange, but the world as a whole was much stranger. Why did Amber suspect her to be something she wasn't?

Okay, maybe it's my fault for not understanding how people think, but still...

Amber finally sighed, making a visible attempt to stay calm. "...Tell me, Elliot. You haven't convinced me just yet. Why would you do this for a complete stranger? Can I trust you to keep her company?"

"I set off to find out whether the stories about Yukari were true. Now that I know they are, I feel like I ought to help her finish her mission in some way. My health prevents me from travelling in the sun for long periods, but nothing's keeping me from playing 'mission control'." Merril smiled proudly. "'Tis the power of the Internet. From what I've seen you'll probably have one of your assistants watching me at all times, but you really have nothing to fear." The smile disappeared. "Seriously... there's something about that kid. I've never met her before in my life, but it still feels like we've been friends for ages."

Amber rolled her eyes. "I've never bought into that whole 'reincarnation' business."

"Neither have I, Mrs. Harrison; I'm a girl of science. But that's just how I feel."

Eyes closed, deep breath. "...Alright, I'll take a chance on this. I expect things to be in order here while I'm gone. ...Just remember one thing, little lady."

"What's that- - -AAGGH!"

From Merril's perspective, it was as if Amber's head had quadrupled in size. Eyes, nose, and teeth all became sharper in their own ways. "If I find out that *any* sort of harm came to my little baby because of you, ***I'm going to grab a baton and conduct Beethoven's fifth symphony on your posterior! IS THAT CLEAR?!"***

"C-clear!" Merril nervously returned, fighting the urge to run screaming back to Mauville. *What in blazes is she, a Kangaskhan?! I thought my life just flashed before my eyes!*

The abrupt calm and serene smile that graced Amber's face following Merril's confirmation was, in its own way, just as scary as her anger. "Good; I'll be going now. No wild parties, okay?" She grabbed her pack and hoisted it onto her back, still smiling, and turned to join Yukari at the door... ...paused, then reached over to the wall and adjusted a picture frame that had tilted sideways when she'd screamed; with that done, she gestured at Yukari to follow her and left the house behind.

Merril remained standing where she was for nearly half a minute after the two of them were gone... then her knees gave way beneath her, and she fell onto them. Past the terror she still felt, she dimly recognized that Ellen was patting her shoulder in a half-hearted attempt at sympathy. Shaking her head, Merril groaned: "That woman is a lunatic! A completely and utterly nightmare-faced *lunatic!"*

"...The Creeper's a lunatic," was Ellen's retort, quietly realizing that the situation wasn't as bad as she'd first believed. " *She's* a mother."

"Still too extreme for me, man. Ugh and a half." Merril finally shook off her fear and stood up with a grunt, turning to face her new friend. Reaching behind her, she checked to make sure her pack and its contents were secure. "But never mind that, Ellen. Are you finished getting ready, and does the library have free wireless?"

"...Yes, to both questions." Ellen tilted her head a fraction. "...How do you intend to stay in contact with Yakumo? I didn't think the PokéGear's range extended out of Hoenn, much less into Sinnoh."

A smirk. "Elly, you are *so* far behind the times. Now come on and let's go." Merril turned and walked out of the house, adjusting her hat a bit before she stepped into the sunlight.

-GAP-

Ellen remained still as she watched Merril turn at the sidewalk and walk down the street towards the library, giving second thoughts to what her mother had been told before she left. *...She feels like she knows me? ...That can't be right. We've been acquainted for less than a day. I've never seen her before yesterday. She shouldn't be acting so* familiar.

"Ellen! Hey, Ellen! Are you coming or not?"

...Still... it's strange, but she's right. I've noticed the same thing: just like she claims to have known me, I feel as if I've known her. *When we met for the first time yesterday, I didn't feel like she could ever mean me any harm. A weird feeling, that, even if I keep seeing Golbat wings each time I close my eyes. I'm not saying it's a* bad *feeling, just... weird...?*

Ellen decided that she'd been lost in her thoughts for too long, for Merril had come back, grabbed her arm and pulled her out of the house. She wondered why she hadn't noticed that, her shoes

scraping against the ground, or the sound of the front door clicking shut. "What are you staring into space for, Slowpoke?" Merril asked a bit indignantly. "Get a move on! Time waits for no librarian, Marian!"

"...So suddenly there's trouble in Rustboro City?" was Ellen's answer, understanding the reference. She pulled her arm out of Merril's grip and picked up her pace. "...I can walk fine on my own, thanks."

"Hey!" Merril protested as Ellen pulled ahead of her. "I know I said to hurry up, but still...!"

"...Weak in the knees, are we?" Ellen asked, her face calm but her tone challenging. "...I barely find time to exercise, and I'm *still* walking faster than you."

"So *that's* what we're resorting to, huh? Come on!" Merril sped up and raced past, tagging Ellen's arm as she went. "You're it!"

Ellen closed her eyes and sighed, but relented and chased after the giggling geek. The sun peeked out from behind a cloud briefly, bathing her in light while leaving Merril covered in a misshapen shadow. The object in her hand glinted a bit in the light, and she finally gave whatever it was she was holding a quick look...

...A Solrock hair-dec?

The moment passed, and everything was shadowed by the clouds once more.

... Eh. I need to stop looking into these things too deeply.

-GAP-

"Professor? Say, Professor? There's a call coming in for you from Pewter City!"

"Okay, okay, Tracey. I'll be right there soon as everyone's breakfast is ready. Would you be willing to handle the feedings while I take the call?"

"Certainly, Professor. I'll be glad to!"

The sun rose over Samuel Oak's laboratory in Pallet Town. On the whole it was a quiet place; no one had attempted to steal from the ranch since Butch and Cassidy's foiled attempt several years past. It couldn't stay that way forever, though, for the news of disappearing Pokémon was not limited to Hoenn.

Oak was finishing making breakfast for those bug-type Pokémon that roamed free on the Lab's property when the call came through. Leaving Tracey to deliver the food, he went to his office to take the call and wondered who'd be contacting him this soon in the day.

He received his answer as Brock appeared on the video screen. "Hey, Professor Oak. How have you been?"

Oak smiled in greeting. "Just fine, Brock. How about you?"

Brock frowned. "I wish I could say the same. Croagunk's disappeared."

Oak mimicked this action. "Disappeared? How do you know that he's missing and not just gone out for a stroll?"

"I started a conversation with Officer Jenny a few days ago, and no one stopped me." Brock waited a few moments to let this sink in. "I looked around, retraced my steps and asked some people if they'd seen it anywhere." A soft sigh. "No such luck. So I talked to Jenny again, and she suggested that I help the department spread the word around. Maybe this should turn up some clues."

"...That may be harder than you think," Oak said, scratching his chin. "Have you been watching the news recently?"

Brock smiled sheepishly. "I've been focusing more on my studies, truthfully..."

"That's quite alright... anyway, yours isn't an isolated case." Oak thought back, trying to remember some of the other reports. "...Ah. On the news last night, they were talking about how many Pokémon were reported missing, whether trained or wild. From what they said, there was nothing in the Pokémons' behavioral patterns that indicated a change in attitude towards their trainer or environment."

"So it's a rash of thefts, then," Brock guessed. "And whoever's doing it, he or she is *good.* "

"I find it more likely that it's a *they* ," Oak told him, frowning. "This isn't just here in Kanto; reports have turned up from as far away as Unova and Kalos. The same M.O., the same circumstances, no clues left at all. With how widespread it is, *any* Pokémon could be in danger..."

"Hmm..."

A short silence as Brock considered what he'd been told...

...and then a light clicked on as he realized something. "Say, Professor... doesn't Muk usually try to smother you at this point?"

Oak looked this way, then that. There was no sign of the sludge Pokémon, not even the disgusting smell that often heralded its presence.

"Uh-oh."

GRIMACE.

In a display of impossibility, the former scientist that Koishi had called 'Hello-san' could be heard frowning.

"...It continues to activate on its own, without rhyme or reason. Something is out of place in this equation..."

-GAP-

On the route heading south and east to Littleroot by way of Petalburg, Yukari strode down the path at a brisk walk, Amber close by. Her face told others she was passive, but inside she planned, planned and continued to plan. Determination to end her home's invasion and the desire to get things done quickly marked every footstep.

I took a shortcut yesterday, and I still feel like I've wasted too much time. I lack Reimu's incredible intuition, yet I can't shake the feeling that my homeland dodged a bullet recently... and that another will be on its way soon. Gensokyo, my wonderful paradise...

Her eyes narrowed and she held a tightened fist close to her chest, something that made Amber raise an eyebrow in curiosity. *Your borders will not be violated for much longer. Today, I renew my vow that I will keep you safe against any and all threats. I promise on my name.*

Far overhead, undetectable save for very powerful binoculars, a blue and white speck jetted through the sky.

-GAP-

Ninetales' moveset: Heat Wave, Energy Ball, Will O Wisp, Double Team

Approximate Level: 29

Yukari's Notes: Turns out that I didn't need to choose after all; Midori made the decision to forget Roar in favor of Energy Ball. Surprising, really... Will O Wisp isn't her favorite attack by a long shot.

Her battle against Amber's Liepard told me that it's going to take a lot of time and effort to work her up to the point where she can help me handle the more serious business of this trip. There's no question that I'll be up against a major threat, if whatever is going down will involve the great beasts of time and space. No border manipulation means that I'll be walking on very dangerous ground, so I'm going to have to use every resource I have available to me, least of all my brain... I'm going to enjoy doing this.

The relationship between me and Midori isn't the same as the one between me and Ran. As a shikigami, Ran is a tool to be used; she knows that, and she treats Chen the same way whenever she's not overcome with worry over her well-being. Thinking of Pokémon as tools would be considered an insult across the board; it's better instead that I treat Midori like I do Yuyuko, like I've been doing all along. She deserves nothing less, and we'll work much better together as a result.

I just hope that when the time comes to leave her behind, I can force myself to do the right thing.

ORIGINAL CHARACTER ALERT

Name: Amber Harrison

Quote: "'Close' counts in everything. It couldn't be called 'close' otherwise, could it?"

Gensokyo Counterpart: ?

Age: Mid-thirties

Species: Human

Physical Description: Around 5'11", with average weight; next to other women and even most men in Hoenn, she practically towers over them (due in no small part to her Unovan origins). Has relatively

short black hair that she gets trimmed every week or two to keep it from going past her neck; prior to her marriage, it was a foot longer. Is naturally light-skinned, but the stress of parenthood has given it a gray pallor that has yet to go away; some have commented that she looks and acts like a zombie when she hasn't had enough sleep. Eyes are yellow. Unless it's summertime or unseasonably warm out, Amber always wears dark gray pants and long-sleeved shirts/sweaters. Favors loafers (when at the library) and tennis shoes with Velcro.

Personality: Is slow to accept the unusual, believing that the world's supposed to work a certain way and that everything else can take a hike. For all that Amber hates Ellen's strange habits and beliefs, she is still fiercely protective of and loving towards her, letting the child out of her sight only reluctantly and making sure she has everything she needs to live comfortably; her family, her assistants (one of whom, unbeknownst to her, is Koakuma's analogue), and the gym leader Roxanne number amongst the few people she absolutely trusts with her safety. Likes helping people learn.

History: See prior appearances. Is considering signing up to battle at the next regional tournament after the whole business with Yukari is dealt with.

Abilities: Nothing special by Yukari's standards, but considerable when compared to ourselves. Amber has that certain toughness brought on by years of traveling and Pokémon training, accidents and such, and she's still able to find time to train her team when she's home from work. As for her Pokémon, she specializes in Dark-types but also keeps Serperior, with whom she shares the closest bond out of them all, around; on the whole they are formidable opponents in battle, as her trophy case can attest to.

Author's Notes: Whenever I imagine Amber speaking, I think of the voice Candi Milo used for Ophelia in *The Life and Times of Juniper Lee.*

In Sabrina's Memory

Autumn 1994 - March 30, 2014